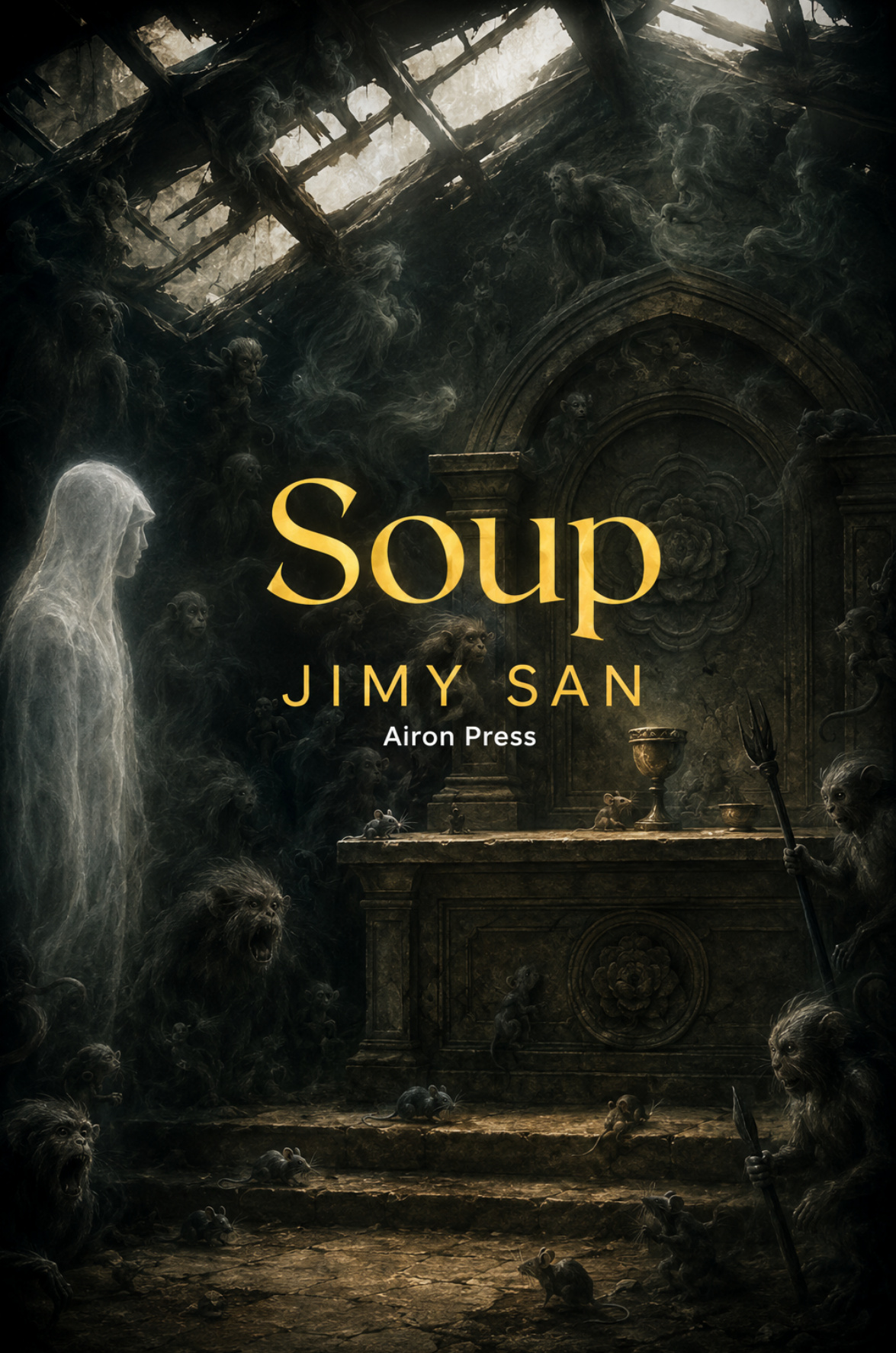




Soup

JIMY SAN

Airon Press

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J. P. SAN



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Be Kind.

About the author

J.P. San, also known as Jimmy, is an American novelist known for weaving suspense, drama, and a touch of the surreal. From a young age, he was deeply attuned to the spiritual world, receiving a profound vision through his grandparents' intercession. This sparked his lifelong journey as a dreamer, seeking hope and guidance through divine signs. Drawing inspiration from everyday moments and human complexities, Jimmy creates emotionally resonant narratives. Outside of writing, he enjoys hiking, coffee, and exploring new places. He currently lives with his family in Rockville, Maryland, USA.



Jimmy San

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Prologue

On the Book

Soup opens a series of novels set in a world I will show you the way a good host reveals a house: this room first, warm and lit, the rest as trust grows. What you hold now is a beginning. This book asks something simpler and harder than patience with complexity: pay attention to small things. A bowl's warmth in a prison cell. A woman who has lost everything, still tending a fire.

Ancient and ongoing, this world's conflicts precede your civilization and will outlast it. Celestial forces move through it in ways that are rarely spectacular and almost never announced. Watchers observe. Controllers intervene, within limits they argue about and occasionally exceed. Essence, the animating principle beneath all created things, including the gods themselves, does not select so much as affirm: recognizing what serves a genuine need the way a natural force recognizes conditions, and responding accordingly.

Aisha is one of those selections: unaware at the start, suspicious by the middle, and still deciding what to do about it at the end.

On the Narrator

Every house has a keeper. In this one, it is me. I am Telal, Chief Prefect of Guardian Oversight, servant of Jehovah and of the Council of Ancients. I have watched humanity long enough to lose the habit of surprise. One hundred and sixty times. I have stood at the edge of disaster and observed. One hundred and sixty times. Carefully, completely, without sufficient power to prevent it. Worlds unmade themselves through the particular combination of human cruelty and celestial failure that no doctrine of intervention has yet solved.

My servant, Ikart, commissioned the image that accompanies this chapter. I had asked him to render my self-portrait, which was perhaps unwise, since Ikart has never understood an assignment in the simple manner intended. The image he returned showed me reaching toward Jehovah, finger to finger, as if creation had paused long enough to notice its reflection. Jehovah appears as many expect him to appear: old, white, solemn, wise enough to be obeyed before he has spoken. Ikart refused to explain the rest. I did not ask him to.

I show you the portrait first so you will understand a rule of this house: the image is never the thing itself. Neither, I should add, is the word. You may trust the account I give you, but be wary of how you conceive anything sourced from the spirit realm. Remember this as you read. A human does not merely see an angel. A human receives one through the architecture of his own reality: the form taken is the form able to reach the mind before us, to correct it, unsettle it, comfort it, or leave behind the mark it would otherwise refuse. Do not assume you stand outside this. The forms you are

given are not the whole truth. They are the door through which truth has chosen to reach you.

When I describe what happens in Mondansk, the mountain town where Aisha's story gathers its force, I am not describing a local conflict. I am describing one iteration of something I have observed across civilizations, centuries, and worlds whose names you have never heard. The pattern is recognizable to me as a recurring dream: the specific dread of knowing what comes next, even before the mind has placed itself in time.

What is different about this iteration, what makes me willing to tell it, is this: something has changed in the energy life forces surrounding me, the prana. In the quality of attention that Essence is directing toward this corner of the world, toward this woman, toward the bowl of soup she makes from bones and desperation in a prison cell that was never designed to hold what she carries. I have been wrong about such things before. I put this on the record so it does not ambush me later. But I have observed one hundred and sixty iterations of this pattern, and I know what certainty feels like when it arrives, and I know what it feels like when something older than certainty moves beneath it.

This is the one hundred and sixty-ninth. It may be the last time the pattern holds.

I am not another observer. I have served long enough to know the difference between a pattern repeating and a pattern straining under its own weight.

On Soup

Before I tell you what happens in Mondansk, come into the kitchen. It is the warmest room in this house, and the one the title is named for. Mondansk is the sort of place where tenderness

is mistaken for weakness, where hunger is treated as discipline, and where a pot of soup can look too small to matter. That is why the title must be understood first: not because the metaphor is obscure, but because it is easily dismissed as quaint, and it is not quaint.

Soup is love in motion. This is not sentiment. It is a description of what love looks like when it has been stripped of ceremony, abundance, safety, and permission, stripped, above all, of permission, and left with only a pot, whatever is at hand, and the choice to make something nourishing out of it anyway. I have watched this choice made in kitchens and in cells, on battlefields, in prison yards, and in the antechambers of celestial councils, and it is always the same choice: whether to treat the available ingredients as insufficient and refuse to begin, or to begin with what there is and discover what the fire makes possible.

Bubbe understood this. She was a mortal woman: a cook, a warrior, one of the finest Controllers I ever trained, and the only person in a long tenure who had the nerve to wave a wooden spoon at me and tell me something I had made needed more love. She knew what Mondansk would teach others too late: that nourishment is not the opposite of war, but one of the ways war is answered. I did not tell her she was correct. She already knew. She was always already certain of the things she was certain of, and she never required my confirmation, which was one of the qualities that made her extraordinary.

Aisha will remind you of her, in some chapters. Not because they are the same. They are not. But because Aisha has the same refusal. In Mondansk, that refusal will matter. She carries the same knowledge that what is in the pot is not the whole of what

the pot can produce, given sufficient heat and attention and the quiet insistence that the people around her deserve better than what they have been given.

Soup has stopped coups, delayed revolutions, and once altered the outcome of a war. The full account of that last belongs to a later volume. Mondansk belongs to that history. I do not say this to mystify you. I say it because the first lesson of this world is the same as the first lesson of a good kitchen: do not mistake simplicity for weakness. Only the careless make that error, and in Mondansk, carelessness has always been one of the first ingredients of ruin.

On What This Series Is Building

There are more rooms in this house than one book can light. This is the first of several novels set in the same celestial geography. Aisha's story in Mondansk and the battle Ikart survives in the Andes occupy different human theaters of the same war. The Controllers and Celestials who observe them move seamlessly between both worlds.

The weapons being developed against us, yes, against us, for I do not pretend to a neutrality I do not possess, are advancing in ways that will require more of the mortals who join our forces than any previous generation was asked to give.

Essence attends to something beneath the surface of apparent readiness: a quality in the person, a heat beneath the pot, a particular stubbornness in the face of conditions that have no reason to produce anything but surrender. When that quality ignites, it is not transferable and cannot be engineered. You will not agree with every selection Essence makes. Neither do I.

Mondansk. The prison. A woman in a red dress sitting in a café where everyone around her believes they already know who she is. She is about to cost them the comfort of that belief.

Not yet a warrior, not yet a revolutionary, not yet what Essence has decided she will become: a woman in a borrowed city with no passport, no money, and a daughter she has never stopped searching for, making soup from scraps in a cell built to break her.

Pay attention to her hands.

That is where it always begins.

One Hundred and Sixty-Nine

It should have been impossible.

A military encampment now lies in ruins beside the ancient stonework of Puka Pukara. The attackers had defied the controls of the gods themselves, following Ikart through a Celestial portal from Telis and driving him back into Cuzco. Such trespass does not go unanswered: the gods keep accounts, and Jehovah keeps them longest.

Smoke coils into the dimming sky, thick black columns rising from far too many places at once, the way grief rises when a world ends. Fires still smolder where the bombardment struck, their glow faint against the coming dark: a hearth even rats and cockroaches despise.

The darkest plume rises from the crater where an angel's spirit-frame fell.

This was no rebel attack. This was an execution: carried out with precision that leaves no room for mercy, no space for accident. Each strike calculated. Each detonation measured. The kind of violence that requires planning, approval, intent.

I know what stood there before the ground turned maroon and the sky went black. I have walked those streets. Homes alive with laughter: adobe walls painted in ochre and turquoise, doorways hung with woven textiles that moved in the mountain wind. Markets overflowing with potatoes and quinoa and corn, vendors calling prices in Quechua and Spanish, their voices rising and falling like music. Smoke from cooking fires drifting through the air, mingling with the scent of eucalyptus and the cool of nearby waters. Elders guarding sacred ground, their weathered hands tracing offerings into the earth. Children chasing chickens through narrow streets, their bare feet slapping against stone worn smooth by centuries. Tourists wandering ancient paths in reverent awe, cameras raised to capture what they could never truly hold. The rhythms of ordinary life: precious because they are ordinary, sacred because they are small.

Now the homes are blasted and burned, walls collapsed inward like broken ribs. The smell of burnt flesh is everywhere: human, animal, indistinguishable. No amount of prayers or prana can wash it away. It clings to the throat, settles into the lungs, becomes part of you. Animals cry or wander lost: llamas with singed wool stumbling through debris, dogs circling the places where their owners fell. The elders, their senses scattered like ash, can no longer remember where they lived. No landmarks remain.

The chapel is rubble. The fountain is dust. The plaza where children played is now a blackened scar. The soft wind is burdened with smoke, ash, and stench, carrying the despair of those who remain. It lingers over this place where villagers danced during Inti Raymi, celebrating harvests, weddings, and saints' days with chicha, drums, and song.

The region has been pushed into a new Danse Macabre. Bones are the only partner left.

On this mournful day, Pachamama's aura hovers among angels and restless spirits, a presence felt rather than seen, a warmth against the cold, gathering the remains of her children. She moves through the ruins searching, her grief vast and silent.

As she passes, the dead are silent. Had they known reinforcements were already moving toward the Altiplano, drawn by the ley lines converging beneath these mountains and by sacred sites that have anchored the realms for millennia, they might have taken comfort. They might have believed what the living always believe: that hubris precedes the fall, that the adversary's satisfaction would be short-lived. But I know better.

What I know has begun to unsettle me in ways I have not felt in a very long time.

Listen carefully, you of carbon and dust. What I tell you matters. Not in theory, but in ash and sulfur and the bodies of children who will never grow old.

Some of this may stir your conscience. That is intended; I have arranged it so, and I will not apologize for it. You may begin to recognize patterns, to glimpse the spirits behind the veil, to feel called to respond.

Even if you see me, you will not recognize me by my appearance. I can appear as anything you imagine, even something amorphous. I have served the Council of Ancients for longer than your civilizations have existed.

I have seen this before. One hundred and sixty times, across as many worlds. The pattern never changes. Only the names. Only the faces.

Until now.

I was traveling to Rosocova when everything changed. The first communication came from a spirit in Pisac: something had happened at Puka Pukara. But that tale was only part of the story. Before I tell you what happened, before I show you the message that altered the course of this war and drove me to alert the Council, you need to understand what that number means.

Cycles of creation, complete and entire. That many times we stood at the edge of the Void and watched everything dissolve and reconstitute. The record runs longer than our witness: one hundred and sixty-eight times Jehovah built his world, watched his creation grow wild and ungovernable, and unmade it. The same gods. The same Celestials. The same spirits. The same souls. All of us returning, carrying what we could not help but carry: the accumulated weight of every version of this war we had already fought.

We assumed this was the nature of things. That the cycle would continue. That Jehovah would always have another attempt waiting, another blank canvas, another chance to build creation without the flaw that made it rebel. Above all else, that we were safe. That whatever damage the cycle inflicted on mortals and worlds and the fabric of things, we endured. Celestials did not fall to mortal weapons. This was not arrogance. It was simply the record of every iteration before this one.

That record has ended.

I was just outside Rosocova when Camille carried the message to me.

Priority transmission from Captain Ikart. Encrypted. Urgent.

I had been thinking about Lakita, my mentee, turning over whether she had truly mastered the empath technique I had taught her: the trick of catching black-hole currents and letting them shear you through time. And I kept wondering how she'd meet me when I came back: formal with respect, or with that exasperated affection of someone who's sure she's outgrown her teacher, yet hasn't.

Small concerns. The kind you allow yourself when the world feels stable.

The tone of the transmission told me stability had ended.

I allowed the message into my presence twice. The second time, my wings were steadier than the first.

Start of Encrypted Message

Commander Victoria,

I am Captain Ikart, currently deployed to investigate emerging threats in the Cusco region. Situation has escalated. Theater of operations shifted to the Altiplano.

What followed was an attack unlike anything I have encountered in one hundred and sixty cycles of service.

Summary: Celestials are now vulnerable to mortal weaponry.

The strike came from forces demonstrating advanced tactical intelligence. They knew my designation. They knew my capabilities. They engaged with intent to neutralize, not merely to resist.

New weapon class encountered. I am designating it an emo-charge pending official classification. The device targets psionic and spiritual vulnerabilities directly. It struck me and caused temporary incapacitation: approximately four minutes of complete systems disruption. Recovery was possible but concerning. Celestials have never been vulnerable to directed energy

weapons of any kind. This represents a fundamental shift in the strategic landscape.

I recovered and retaliated, forcing enemy withdrawal. However, the technology behind this weapon suggests development by entities with knowledge of celestial composition and weakness points. Origin unknown. Threat assessment: severe.

The enemy withdrew in organized fashion, suggesting coordination and command structure. They will return with refined tactics.

Before departing the region, I will submit a comprehensive after-action report. Enemy forces are mobilizing. I have identified several exploitable weaknesses in their mechanical design, detailed in the full report. However, I assess these vulnerabilities will be corrected within days. Window of tactical advantage: minimal.

Request: Dispatch specialized response team for immediate consultation. Recommend private briefing on classified aspects of this incident.

Note: I understand Colonel Teel has been assigned to Rosocova for recruit evaluation. Given the escalating threat environment, recommend priority reassessment of training protocols. We are preparing not only for conventional engagement but for conflict across multiple planes of existence.

I have been granted medical leave. Soul damage requires recovery time. The battles will not cease, but I must.

Until we rest, in Paradise.

—Capt. Ikart, Field Investigator

End of Message

I did not continue to Rosocova that day.

Instead, I turned myself around and took my thoughts toward the Altiplano. Toward the ruins. Toward whatever this means.

Ikart calls it soul damage. He is correct, but not in the way he thinks. The damage is not only his. It is the damage that comes from understanding that what you believed was permanent was only untested. That the walls you never reinforced held not because they were strong but because no one had yet found the door.

I need you to understand what troubles me most, and I will say it plainly because subtlety has no place in what is coming.

Each time Jehovah unmakes creation and begins again, we return. All of us. The Celestials, the Controllers, the Watchers, the gods who populate the worlds he builds. We come back carrying memory we cannot always name but cannot fully shed either. And creation comes back too. Mortals return. Civilizations return. The rebellion against divine order that always, eventually, emerges. It returns as well. And with each cycle, it returns having learned something. Not consciously. Not with memory intact in the way ours is. But the learning is embedded somewhere deeper than memory. In the pattern itself. In the accumulated pressure of repeating the same thing, over and over, cycle upon cycle.

They built a weapon that hurt Ikart. An emo-charge. A device engineered not to damage buildings or bodies but to target what a Celestial actually is: the psionic architecture, the spiritual framework, the composition that no mortal should even be able to perceive, let alone weaponize. They knew his designation. They knew his capabilities. One hundred and sixty cycles of service, and Ikart had never been brought to four minutes of complete systems disruption by anything created from carbon and dust.

How do they know what we are made of? Where does that knowledge come from, if not from the residue of all those cycles of watching us, fighting us, dying at our hands, and returning to fight again?

Here is what I believe, and I say it without the comfort of certainty: if Jehovah decides this creation has failed him, he will dissolve it and begin again, as he has decided so many times before. The next creation will not start from nothing.

It will start from here. From emo-charges. From the knowledge that Celestials can bleed. Whatever is embedded in the pattern will carry forward. And the next creation will be stronger, and more precise, and closer to whatever it is that creation, in its long patient rebellion, is ultimately reaching for.

It has happened before, in miniature. The Tower of Babel was meant to teach carbon that unity without humility is tyranny. Jehovah chose to scatter them rather than let them finish.

We may already be inside the cycle where Jehovah does not get to choose.

Something stirs beyond the Void, not within it, but beyond it, in a place even Essence cannot see clearly. Something neither flesh nor spirit gathers there. Something that does not ache to be filled but hungers to consume. It waits like a storm forming on a horizon no one is watching, building pressure in the deep places where even the Ancients do not look.

And now mortals have learned to wound us.

So I am not asking you to stand with us because it is glorious. It is not. I am asking you because the arithmetic has changed and we need more hands on the line. The Council will invite those chosen by Essence to join us. You will be confirmed by the power

of Chauvin material: that ancient force forged from opposing principles, order and chaos bound together. You will be elevated to become Controllers: guardians of all that is made.

But understand what you are guarding against: the accumulation of all those cycles of learning, now weaponized, now aimed at the assumption that we cannot fall. Peace will never reign. The Lamb will lie down with the Lion, yes, but only because you will watch from above, commanding sky and sea and land, holding that peace in place through vigilance and force.

The Void is growing again. Not slowly. Not blindly. With intent.

And we who have stood guard for millennia are learning that we, too, can fall.

My chief investigator is wounded in ways no medical report will capture. I am standing in the ruins of a plaza where children danced three days ago. And somewhere beyond the edge of what even I can see, something is watching this moment and finding it instructive.

I would very much like this cycle, the one hundred and sixty-ninth, to be different.

But I am no longer certain we control how it ends.

Will you stand with us?

The Altar

I need to preface our time here by naming what I believe the remedy to be: an unassuming bowl of soup. A remedy provided by the gods and abandoned for more conventional weapons of warfare. But before I tell you about soup, or what Bubbe knew that gods have forgotten, you must understand the world that did more than need it. The world demanded it. As I explain this to you, I descend toward one of the places dearest to me in this universe: the Altar of Rosocova, where generations of angels came to learn and where the wisest Celestials still come to consider what the universe has made of itself.

I have made this descent through more versions of Mondansk than its people could remember. Today, memory reaches me before the ground does. Clothed in light, my wings folded close, I pass into the amber cold as it rises to meet me.

Boundless. Devoid of radiance. A sea of absence. As the dark mountains rise beneath me, I remember what this world was before time found cadence and space learned orientation. There was only the Void, a darkness that existed before light could define it and before form could contain it. Even now, I feel something

of its loneliness beneath all that has followed. It stirred as though drawing a breath too deep to hold, resisting every boundary, trembling before release.

Along the edges of that immense emptiness drifted the faintest boundary of Essence, suspended within the Void but never entangled with it. It carried no purpose then, only force, like music felt in the bones before the ear perceives it. A rhythm pressed against the darkness, nearly indistinguishable from it, trembling between dissolution and form. Essence pulsed at the brink of union but would not merge. Resistance without struggle. Separation acknowledged, though not yet claimed. Every longing that followed would remember that distance.

Then hope rose before there was anything to hope for. No witness remains, only a trace later remembered as the First. A breath drawn before lungs existed to receive it. A question formed before a mouth could give it voice. Before power answered, there was only the longing to begin.

A rift.

Shadows crossed and parted, leaving the faintest disturbance, as though stillness itself had been struck and sent trembling outward. In that moment of severance, Essence answered. The Void must be filled. It was an answer born of hope, though not every hand would honor it.

Gods erupted.

I have watched the pattern repeat. Now, in the valley taking shape below me, I see what its consequences have cost.

In this last cycle, the one hundred and sixty-ninth, giants emerged: radiant and raw, violent as a pot kicked over. They stood beside the gods, compelled by the same imperative to fill

what had been torn open. This was separation given purpose, a reaching across the space between Essence and nonexistence toward what had once been whole. Each god stood within the endless darkness. Beside each one loomed a giant, equal in force and not yet an enemy.

But no god sought another. They might have filled the wound together, yet each proclaimed itself the sole Maker of All and demanded obedience from everything it brought forth. They mistook solitude for sovereignty and warred for dominion over the space they had been born to fill. Through that violence, the pattern emerged: gods would create. Giants would destroy. Not by nature, but by the roles their conflict carved into being.

This is the world soup was made for. That is the wound, immense and unwitnessed, from which every hunger for comfort, belonging, and return first arose. But we need not remain at such a distance. I am low enough now to see lights scattered through the valley, each one holding some small life against the dark. It is time to speak of something closer to home.

When power and progress converge, mortals reach for the instruments they trust most: tactics, tools, force. I have watched them splinter nations with each new attempt to hold them together. This is especially painful because carbon was not brought forth merely to inhabit what the gods created. Mortals were meant to make sense of it: to witness, name, remember, and give meaning to what power alone could only bring into form. Yet when force fails them, they apply more of it, or offer carefully worded pleas to those who profit from the suffering.

What is needed may be quieter, but not lesser. A bowl of soup. Warm. Unassuming. Passed from one pair of hands to another. It

cannot close the first rift, but for a moment, it allows the separated to recognize themselves in one another.

Let me tell you about a woman who gave meaning to what greater beings had only learned to make.

Few recruits understand the force carried in a grandmother's embrace. One described Bubbe's hug as "the richness of slow-cooked chicken fat." Even Celestials find that comparison difficult to defend. Another called it "the gentle murmur of carrots, celery, and onions brightened by lemon." I understood what they were reaching for, though neither quite found it. Lakita came closest: "a slow golden bliss, like sunset slipping into a river." She had known those arms before the rest of us understood what they could hold.

Strange descriptions, but precise. Bubbe was one of the finest cooks and Controllers I ever trained, and among the bravest mortals I have known. Her kitchen was a sanctuary of living memory: dill, thyme, parsley, rosemary, their scents drifting like invitations through an old wooden door. Long after her death, those who had eaten there still spoke of her soup as though warmth itself had once taken a mortal form.

On Lakita's graduation day, she prayed for one more taste. I poured her a bowl from a batch Bubbe had preserved during the unrest. Lakita lifted the spoon, tasted it, and wept. For a moment, she was not a graduate or a Controller. She was a granddaughter returned to her grandmother's kitchen. I never told her the soup had once helped stop a coup and might have ended a revolution. That history belonged to power. The memory belonged to her.

Lakita later learned what Bubbe had always understood: an embrace can carry force without becoming violence. It is the

closest mortals come to peace without touching heaven. I have known angels who would surrender much for one that carried a true memory of home. Perhaps I am among them.

These things are simple, yes, but only the careless mistake simplicity for weakness. Bubbe taught me that. She was the only mortal who ever dared wag a wooden spoon at me and mutter, "Needs more love." I did not always understand what she meant. Perhaps I envied the way flesh remembers what spirit forgets: hunger, warmth, the comfort of being held. Bubbe understood that soup was love in motion. In her hands, it could soothe or incapacitate, heal the wounded or undo the ambitions of empires. She made tenderness precise. She made it power.

Bubbe was one woman, but the love that answered through her has appeared at every scale I have ever watched. Soup has strengthened bodies, steadied resolve, and softened conflicts no blade could settle. Once, it altered the outcome of a war; the full account belongs to a later volume. It is not sorcery. It is carbon giving purpose to what creation placed within its hands. No empire. No campaign. Only one person feeding another and refusing to let apathy finish what hardship began.

Though I was born a fighter, I have always believed healing is the nobler art. I have watched mercy fail, kindness exploited, and wounds answered with deeper wounds. Still, I hold to it.

In war, hugs are not practical. So I choose soup. I will heal with sword and fist when I must. And afterward, soup. Power may restrain what threatens life, but in a worthy hand, it must also nourish what remains.

Doctrine is considerably easier to hold at altitude, and I am nearly past altitude now. The mountains have a way of making

suffering specific. Below me, Mondansk takes shape: a patchwork nation stitched together by the United States and China, surviving more by necessity than by faith. I have seen this arrangement before. A puppet government. A secret police. An enforcement arm given a name meant to inspire the particular fear for which law offers no remedy. The Black Brigade.

Lights vanish as patrols pass along the roads. Families draw curtains before dawn. Peace here is stretched thin, its seams already straining in the way I have learned to recognize before the tearing begins. Beneath the surface, pressure does not disperse. It gathers.

Power can seize land, redraw borders, and enforce silence. But it cannot erase the ordinary human insistence on living: raising children, sharing food, sleeping without fear. Hold these things down for generations and they do not disappear. They gather in secret. They pass from hand to hand. Like roots beneath a forest cleared to prove dominion, they wait until the ground can no longer contain them. What returns is not what power destroyed, but what its cruelty made necessary.

I have descended here many times. Cities vanished. Borders shifted. Conflicts outlived the names of those who began them. Yet these are not what remain within me. The people do.

When I teach, as it seems I do in nearly everything, I speak often of Lakita and her grandmother, Bubbe, who lived among these hills before anyone thought to give them names. I do not remember them merely as lessons or histories. I carry them through every part of my spirit.

Even now, Bubbe's memory draws me toward a place near the Altar where she once felt closest to heaven and where something

of her still lingers. I have carried many things into Mondansk over its long becoming. Power. Warning. Judgment. What it needed most, and what I too often failed to bring, was what Bubbe carried in a wooden spoon.

And so I carry it now, the ingredient that gives all others purpose, toward the one place in Mondansk that has not forgotten why it was raised. The earth beneath Rosocova keeps what history tries to bury. I descend through the cooling air toward the Altar, hidden among broken stone. Mortals once made sacrifices here and asked their creator for peace. The Altar holds the shape of their hope. These shattered stones bear what answered them. More importantly, the stones remember who stood here, set in witness so that what happened in this place would not pass unmarked.

The chamber recognizes me. It gathers the weight of all it has witnessed and draws it close, as though deciding what it will permit me to remember. A pewter cup and a chipped bowl rest upon the Altar. Once, this bowl carried divine broth, its warmth filling the chamber like a dawn neither of the worshippers wished to release. The scent and heat are gone now. Still, the chamber turns the first gold of morning toward the bowl, and for a moment I remember what nourishment was meant to be. The spirit of this place has always guarded the threshold where intention pauses before entering the world as consequence.

Essence is coming. Not to redeem. Not to judge. To witness. In my experience, nothing unsettles the guilty and the chosen more equally than being seen by the one from whom nothing can be concealed.

Understand this before she arrives: what nourishes can be corrupted by the hand entrusted to serve it. The same warmth that frees a prisoner can be measured out to keep a captor comfortable. The same broth that nourishes a republic can be ladled by its keepers to decide who eats and who starves. I have watched powers claim to serve the bound while preserving the hands that hold the keys. I have watched the force that keeps a world turning become an instrument for grinding part of that world to dust.

This began as cost, not failure. Nothing fills without displacing something else; that consequence was written into creation from the first rift in the Void. But consequence is not corruption. What followed depended upon the hands entrusted with what had been made.

The ladle may choose its bearer, but it cannot choose what the hand will serve. Perhaps it has found its way to you. Can you hear me, or are you simply reading the words?

Beyond Uzhhorod, a new day brightens the horizon in a particular shade of gold I have seen at the fall of empires and the beginning of things made holy. I have never learned to tell which it promises until the light has fully arrived.

The bowl gleams upon the Altar, waiting to learn what hand will reach for it.

In the end, the broth does not choose whom it poisons.

The cook does.

Soon

***M**y time with my apprentice was fast approaching, yet I lingered, not from duty, but from memory. Angels are granted eternity, and still I circle back to this place again and again. I only wish the land were more forgiving. The stones, as always, remember me with vivid candor, and I, fool that I am, give them audience. Their retort shifts my attention from fond nostalgia to something sharper. In my silence, they insist on admiration, on being the focus of attention. They seem determined to recruit me into "**rock care.**" Honestly, I've often been tempted to grind the larger stones into pebbles, just to learn whether the smaller ones are any less opinionated.*

Still, I return to this place, where an altar lies dormant, half-buried by earth, storms, and bombs, left asunder. Not for answers, but for the silence between them. It is not explanation I seek here, only quiet. The impulse to ask why rises, as it always does, but I set it aside. That is how angels endure. We work. We obey. And occasionally, we are granted time to rest. A recent concession, perhaps meant to keep more of us from straying beyond the circle we pretend not to see.

My good friend Salina often says that all an angel needs is peace and quiet, the kind the stones themselves refuse to allow me. Salina

says it simply, without claim or ceremony, and I accept it without hesitation. But what am I without my deeds? Peace and quiet without achieving the goal of my creator seems disconcerting.

Jehovah, as you might suspect, keeps a perfect account: a flawless ledger of deeds and words, unblinking and unwavering. Essence responds differently. Not by tally, but by presence itself. Not merely decisions or outcomes, nor the sum of predispositions shaped by flesh and circumstance. It attends to the quiet heat beneath a pot, coals glowing in silence, simmering meaning the gods, in all their clamor, often overlook.

We Celestials like to pretend that sentiment lies beneath us. Yet one memory clings to me: Bubbe, ruling her cramped kitchen as if it were the axis on which the universe spun. Her voice was prayer, complaint, and lullaby, each syllable thick as broth, salted with love.

Her footsteps are gone, but her rhythm lingers in steaming bowls and in gestures passed down like a favored seasoning.

From the outside, life here seems unchanged: chimney smoke curling, kettles boiling at dawn, prayers rising into the mist like steam from a broth that never leaves the fire. But look closer. The spirits of Mondansk are never still. Every act in the physical world, whether mending, kneeling, or stirring, becomes a quiet form of defiance, a thread of resistance woven into the fabric of the ordinary. Ethereal forms gather around a pot simmering with scraps and herbs, never elegant, but always rich with possibility.

The spirits here do not sort themselves for anyone's convenience. No ledger holds them. No taxonomy holds them. Just as the jungle returns thicker wherever mortals cut it, spirits abound wherever mortals fall: fussing, fighting, sometimes romancing.

The living witness the first regrowth. The second flourishes unseen, thick upon the bones.

A figure slips through Rosocova's quiet lanes, half-shadow, half-story, all legend. For once, the legends are mostly true. Children whisper them with wide eyes, unaware of their accuracy. She serves under my command now: a warrior tested in both bone and heart.

Violence forged her strength, but her gentleness, and her instinct for understanding what moves a mind, are just as true. As with all under my care, her thoughts are open to me. But consent, I still honor. A world without it crumbles faster than bryndza sprinkled over potato dumplings. That principle alone brings me here today. I am evaluating her effectiveness to train others.

Her crimson-and-emerald duster trails over black leather, its folds creased by the mountain wind. Her steps carry no sound, only intention. In a single breath, she scales the clock tower and slips into its shadow. Her eyes gleam, sharp and searching. I have seen them in battle, narrowing when mercy wavers.

To the shepherd below, she was a black-winged phantom. To the child in the attic, a woman woven of wind. To the spirits curled in the beams, something older, unnamed, yet familiar.

From her perch, Lakita surveys the village. Her feathers shimmer as she takes the eagle's form. Her breath slows. Her focus sharpens. She senses the domovyk in the rafters; I feel it as well, curled in the grain of the timber. Near the top of the stair lies a recess, once a shrine, now only a hollow where forgotten secrets gather dust.

She lingers, as if listening to a memory that never finished telling itself. A crow slices through the silence. The wind shifts, carrying

hints of cinnamon bark and old linen, the same scent that once clung to her grandmother's kitchen. Lakita closes her eyes and whispers, "Bubbe."

I have kept that memory for her: Bubbe's hands, cracked and steady, smoothing honey into a chipped bowl of milk. The air, thick with fennel and beeswax, wrapped the room like a spell disguised as supper. Bubbe, gray and stooped, asked for little: respect, warm bread. But her milk and honey meant protection, a promise folded into sweetness.

In the hush between breath and recognition, the grand bird, vast, sun-forged, sovereign of the air, folded its wings not in descent, but in something like surrender. Light tore through its form, each feather flaring with Essence, scattering into color.

Green streamed first: the hue of renewal.

Red followed, a pulse of will.

Blue came last, unfurling like memory returning home.

Within that cascade, the body bent, reshaped, and remembered a form it had once known.

When the brilliance faded, Lakita stood before me. Human again. Dragon boots gleaming with brilliant teeth, her eyes still carrying sky. Her gown clung like mist to flame, sheer folds rippling with the ghost of flight, her hair trailing wind. I felt the echo of wings in the fabric's sway.

And though the air had calmed, every current in creation still remembered her passage.

She moved without haste.

Placed a heel of rye into a bowl.

Drizzled honey along the spoon's edge.

Lit a stub of beeswax.

Her eyes darkened with resolve. Her voice rose into a singsong learned at Bubbe's knee:

"Domu, tayere, guter shayner:

Bend the boards, sweep the air.

In this house, no foot shall falter,

No grief shall cling to chair or stair..."

She finishes with care, blows out the candle with a kiss, and turns three times sunwise. Bubbe's way. "So the little one doesn't get dizzy," she murmurs, almost smiling.

Child's logic. Grandmother's spell. A thread that once held the world in place.

Inheritances are rarely clean. Some pass by blood. Some by memory. All pass through trembling hands.

Even those made of honey and warm milk leave marks that do not fade.

Silence settles over the tower. I note it, as I do everything. Smoke from the candle rises, swirling into a crosscurrent she has not noticed. Her body stills, not in pain, but in something else. Passage. Opening. A shift. A hush. Then a flutter: An owl's wings.

Such changes always announce themselves in scent: cinnamon, sage, salt, smoke. Unless the shapeshifter has learned to mask it, as Lakita has mastered, oh so well. The signal stirs when a soul brushes against what it once was, or dares to become what it might yet be. It is time, then, to descend from my vantage and meet her at the tower.

The folds of her coat lifted, caught by a gentle breeze, as if a breath were rising from the very stones beneath her feet. Lakita slipped between presence and absence, between aetheris and watcher. Controllers, those like her, often straddle the space be-

tween carbon and the astral plane, the in-betweens. I traced her arc as she carved through the pale morning sky, silent, certain, a bridge between waking and whatever waits beyond the Veil.

At that moment, Camille's voice came as a whisper, quiet yet insistent. One of the angels assigned to me had passed along reports of unusual occurrences, the sort that belonged more to myth than any earthly ledger. And yet, unbelievably, they had found their way into the police blotter. What struck me as most peculiar was not just the content of the reports, but the fact they seemed to point directly to my student, though they never named her. They spoke only of her disguises.

Three mortals had witnessed something, and their accounts were no less surreal for it. A farmer swore he had seen an owl blink at him with human eyes, his voice thick with disbelief as he recounted the moment. A baker's wife dreamt of a feather left delicately on her windowsill, as if some unseen hand had placed it there for her to find. A shepherd, crossing himself twice with muttered prayers, claimed to have seen a spirit pass through the air, silent, swift, unmistakable.

The most curious report came from a boy, years away from earning his detective shield, yet already practicing authority. He claimed to have seen a woman cloaked in smoke through a pane of glass. His blinking contraption, the kind mortals trust to guard their homes, captured nothing but a smear of red and gold. Machines, after all, rarely keep pace with miracles.

This is the nature of Lakita's passage: real, but elusive. Seen, but never held. I laughed when a child pointed skyward and cried, "Look, Bubbe's bird!" only to forget why she had said it. The old

man beside her simply nodded and finished his prayer: Some things look like birds, but they are not. Amen.

Meanwhile, Essence stirred the air with whispers: ancient, curling like ivy, alive and insistent. My instincts read the pulse of her thoughts: white embers, smoldering quietly, waiting for the breath of something more. Not yet a flame, but a promise, flickering just beneath the surface.

She never shouts. Her presence fills emptiness the way broth fills a bowl: silent, unnoticed, but inevitable. You do not hear her. You feel her. Sometimes, you taste her: subtle, yes, but undeniable, a warmth that seeps into your ribs before your mind can even name the flavor. She settles into the cracks Chaos leaves behind, filling the void like molten gold poured into the jagged fractures of broken stone.

Her whispers have bent the will of kings and steadied the hearts of gods, never loud, but always certain. Never mistaken. When Essence withdraws, Chaos prowls, eager to fill the space she leaves behind, ravenous for the void. Some call her wind. Others call her will. But I have learned not to argue with either. She is both and neither: an enigma that moves where the world does not understand.

This time, Essence had chosen the young woman before my mentee. Her name, Aisha, was spoken by Essence with the finality of a decision long made, without pause or hesitation. Whatever attunement others carried, Aisha did not wear it openly. It was buried beneath layers, like a seed hidden beneath the earth, waiting to be discovered.

Without Lakita's knowledge, I reached out, attempting to speak into Aisha's mind, hoping to offer quiet guidance. But the whisper

faltered, met with resistance, as if her very soul were a shield. My words would not take root.

"Guard your balance, not your pride," I tried again. Heard, but not listened to. She would need her own space to bend and grow, or break, as the winds of Essence and Chaos would determine.

Lakita looked toward me, though I remained hidden in the shadows. A soft laugh escaped her lips, like a private joke meant only for herself. She felt me there, even if she could not see me, and she did not seem bothered in the least.

Before I could settle into that thought, Aisha's voice cut through the moment like a blade: "And if the balance errs?" The words hung in the air, unexpected and raw. There was something in her question beyond defiance: a stubborn hunger, a refusal to accept the path without testing its edges first.

Essence had chosen her. And Essence does not err. What would come next belonged to Lakita alone.

By then, Rosocova had shaken off sleep. Morning stretched, golden and cool, across its stones. From her tower, Lakita watched Aisha move through the damp streets, her red skirt tugged by the breeze. Heads turned, some admiring, some wary, most retreating back into silence.

Her hands told a different story, though no one thought to read them: nicked and steady, opening and closing at her sides, as if already working something the street could not see.

Through spirit-sight, Lakita brushed the edges of the girl's intent. Beneath her composure, pride stirred, a thrill at being seen. Vanity, soft but persistent, warming like sunlight through glass.

Essence had chosen her, yes. But Lakita's doubt sharpened. Something in Aisha's stride rang off-key, like a melody missing its anchor, as if the whole town were holding its breath, waiting.

Admiration glinted, sharp as a blade. Behind it, suspicion coiled: quiet, patient, venomous.

A man walked beside Aisha, the one who had arranged her release. Polite, composed, aching to be seen.

Lakita exhaled, slow and deliberate. The wind shifted.

Essence gathered in it, not in volume, but in gravity: a word forming behind held breath. Whatever she had come to say, she held it still, the way heat waits beneath a lid.

I hovered just beyond the threshold, embarrassed by my thoughts, mildly amused by the memory: Brahma once mocked me beneath the Tree of Knowledge, muttering to Jehovah:

"Tel is like dusk: too light to hide, too dark for beauty. Older than instruction, and stinking of that stillness even dogs avoid."

The kindness of the gods lies in their absence: the gods rarely visit, fickle creatures, often rude. Everything is about them. They have learned to let me work. Essence is different. She too comes rarely, but when she arrives, it is always quiet, and only after something has already begun to move.

Humans: erratic, brilliant forms of carbon. Ungrounded, yes, but with agendas, reasons for reason. And I envy them.

They get beginnings. They get endings. They even get tombstones.

If I had one, it would read: **TELEL CAME**. Not to interfere.

I would be laughing under the ground, watching to see how many lines Lakita would cross out in her attempt to prove her cleverness.

High above the square, Lakita watched with narrowed eyes, sensing Essence in every breath of wind. Her utterances are subtle. Not in sentences, but in currents: a tug at the heart, a tightening in the ribs when paths diverge. Today, that tug rattled even Lakita's ironclad calm.

The rite is more muscle memory than catechism now, reverent in a way only the oldest habits can be. I don't watch for weakness. Even so, Lakita doesn't falter. But for caution, I nitpick. She's grown wary of me. Caution isn't her nature; she moves like certainty in flesh. When she measures her words, I listen.

Essence went one way, Lakita, the other. I paused with disbelief. My feelings pointed toward my investigator. They were unsubstantiated.

It started small: a phrase burnished too smoothly, a protective pattern folded like a secret note into her intent. A question shaped in her cadence: dry as ash, barbed with irony, mischievous with menace. Ikart leaves fingerprints, ones you can't scrub off. I know. I've tried.

My investigator is maddeningly bright: unbearably right most days, insufferable on others. Loving him would be simple. Disliking him, simpler. But truth is rarely simple. Lakita loves him like a familiar thorn; his cynicism shapes doubts she'd otherwise swallow. She calls him "uncle" when defiance needs a disguise. He feeds her answers; I offer silence, questions folded like gifts no one's sure they want to open. Both appeal. Both wound.

She obeys, burns with purpose. But lately, when I speak of the Council, she listens like a cook tasting half-finished broth, debating whether it needs more time or something harder to name.

She chooses what to swallow, what to spit. I note it. Balance, I have learned, is rarely built on trust alone.

She hasn't crossed that edge yet. But the wind is shifting. If her loyalty bends toward fire instead of form, I won't chain her. I'll trust that the training holds and that Ikart's whispers haven't smothered what we planted. I mark the moments. My craft is not interference, but witness: to remember, and, when necessary, to hope quietly from the margins.

She's not lost, but the winds around her new candidate stir. Lakita studies the potential student, Aisha: the tilt of her head, the set of her shoulders, the flicker in her eyes. There's a spark, the kind Essence named long before Lakita learned to question. She's seen it in Lakita, too. Promise, mirrored.

But promise is not mastery. A spark alone won't temper a blade. The girl clings to her story, her will, as if it could carry her beyond flesh and fear. Some are born with spiritual agility braided into them, lightning threaded through bone. Others are remade: flesh rewoven with enchanted gold, shaped by a recipe whispered by Brahma and Sodo. I've seen both take shape. Neither comes easy.

So we wait, watching the pot. Testing the broth with a cautious spoon, letting it simmer, stirring gently to see what the heat reveals.

I once had a student named Amy. Young by your standards, maybe twenty, and clever in the way knives are clever: always aware of the soft spots. She asked the kind of questions that stuck in the air long after the conversation ended.

One afternoon, as I shelved a volume unopened since the Fall, she stopped me.

"Why," she asked, "does no one ever choose demons to help? Aren't demons just angels who, on average, get more done? Even if we're 'angel-first,' couldn't we request help from demons too? Might get better results. You know, challenge the angels of our better nature."

I paused, hand on the cracked leather spine. "You're right," I said. "And dangerously perceptive." I didn't add that Jehovah would frown at both of us for this conversation.

Ikart, my irrepressible second, just laughed. "Demons don't get invited to the party," he said. "But they bring the best wine and save your soul while you're passed out. Still, no one asks for them by name. Names are politics. Allegiance is the game. Jehovah pointed and labeled, and the rest of us played along. A demon who saves you? You'll call him an angel. Helps you sleep better."

Amy squinted. "So... evil is just a matter of branding?"

Ikart shrugged, fighting a grin. "Evil's just bad press, some days."

"Not quite," I said. "There are powers far above me, unshakable in their certainty about right and wrong. They make the decisions. The rest of us... adjust. Even dissenters kneel eventually."

Ikart added, "Sometimes just a wrist." He wiggled his fingers.

Amy looked down at her hands, flexing them like they'd been accused of something.

"Ignore him," I said.

She looked up at me, eyes wide and searching. I wanted to tell her about the demon who wept over a soul dragged from the Pit, or about the wings I scorched for a law I never understood. But some truths come slow. Some burn too hot.

Ikart leaned in, still savoring the moment. "Amy, truth has angles. Morality's just a costume others picked out for you. We do the work."

Amy's brow furrowed. "Are you ever serious?"

Ikart tilted his head, then smiled like a child who'd just stolen a cookie and gotten away with it.

She shook her head and followed me into the deeper shelves. Her silence trailed behind her, not like a grand thought, but like a frayed ribbon someone forgot to tie. Amy never asked questions for power. She asked because she couldn't settle for an easy answer.

In that, she reminded me of someone else.

Aisha and Lakita share a common trait: impatience. They treat control as a virtue, not a temptation. Patience is my gift, not theirs.

Lakita has always stepped forward, plucking the fruit before it even knew it was ripe. I warned her not to harvest spirit before it ripened. She heard me, but like many who move with urgency, she disagreed. To her, action is clarity; waiting tastes too much like surrender.

Sometimes, she was right. Other times, she lifted the lid too soon and spoiled what the heat might have healed in time.

Now, she watches Aisha, raw, stumbling, yet carrying a thin, bright thread.

Lakita feels the pull to intervene, to force the unfolding. But across the wind, another presence settles into the corner of her spirit: me. I haven't come to stop her, not yet. I've seen what Aisha carries.

Doubt stirs in Lakita's chest. Essence has never been wrong, not in the long arc I've learned to read. Her certainty hums like a clear

note cutting through a crowded room. Still, Lakita wonders: can Aisha loosen her self-made walls long enough to hear the deeper rhythm?

Lakita doesn't fear Essence. She fears herself: her judgment, her quick hands. The world's opinions carry little weight; it's her own measure that matters most. She inhales, lets the air settle, and watches Aisha pass through their gaze, unbowed. Resolve begins to harden, tempered like steel beneath a smith's hammer.

Then, as the wind shifts, Essence whispers a single word, both gift and warning: "Soon."

The Café

Aisha and Alexei stood at the hotel's entrance, the cool morning air brushing her skin as she tried to shake off the haze of the night. Alexei muttered something about walking through the park to a café, his voice distant, his attention already elsewhere. The night would not arrange itself into anything she understood. What had seemed exhilarating in the dark now felt hollow in daylight.

The morning carried the same unreality as the night she had fled Punjab. Months earlier, as Aisha prepared to leave in darkness, an older woman had pressed a folded note into her palm without meeting her eyes. On it were her daughter's new name and a Mondansk address belonging to someone who might help her. After the long, dangerous journey, Aisha reached the address and found a young man waiting for her. He spoke in a hurried whisper.

"Not here. Don't come to this house again, and don't ask questions in the street. Come to a gathering tonight. My grandmother will be there. She can answer your questions and tell you where to find your daughter."

The journey had cost Aisha nearly everything she possessed, but she still had hash she could sell at the gathering, enough perhaps to keep herself fed for a few more days. Money, however, was not why she went. The note was the only thread leading to her daughter, and Aisha had learned not to release a thread simply because it led somewhere dangerous. The grandmother was there, just as promised: a small woman with steady hands who spoke a name, a street, a town, and made Aisha repeat them back until they held. Minutes later, before the words had finished settling into memory, the police closed around her with the hash still in her hand. Alexei, a handsome officer who claimed to feel sorry for her, arranged for her release into his custody. Aisha carried the grandmother's words out of the station like contraband: the one thing no one had thought to take from her.

And now she was here, with nothing left to sell, nowhere else to go, and her freedom resting in Alexei's hands. Somewhere in this country, closer now than she had ever been, her daughter might be waking without knowing her mother's name. Aisha wondered whether anyone had told the child who she was. Whether anyone ever would.

She understood now how easily Alexei had drawn her into his world. Older and more experienced, he had known how to carry her from one moment into the next before she could question where they were leading. Her mind returned to the beginning of the night: dinner beneath crystal chandeliers, each course a performance; the breathless ride through Mondansk's mountain roads, too fast and reckless; then the VIP club, thick with music, expensive drinks, whispered caresses, and a kiss that had seemed

to stop time. She had never known such intensity, and in the darkness, she had mistaken it for intimacy.

"Next time, let's go to Rome," Alexei had whispered on the way home, his thumb tracing slow circles over her knuckles, his voice offering a future she had wanted to believe in. The sense of betrayal did not come all at once. It stirred with the dawn, with the cool air against her bare arms, and with the ease with which Alexei's tenderness disappeared once the night was over.

She was no longer sure she wanted a future with him. She needed time: enough to gather money, papers, a way out, enough to reach the address she carried in her memory and vanish with her daughter. Until then, she would endure him and call it patience.

Aisha closed her eyes, and the Velvet Suite returned with painful clarity. Hours earlier, it had seemed like a refuge: chilled champagne, fruit and delicate cookies, rose petals leading to the bed. By morning, bottles, towels, and the scattered remains of the night lay abandoned. There was nothing unusual about the disorder, yet it made the room feel used up, its promises reduced to debris. Sunlight had cut across the silk sheets, exposing what darkness had concealed. Even outside, the morning air seemed to carry a trace of the room's sweetness, faint and unfamiliar, as though the night had not fully released her.

She had awakened tired but pleased to find Alexei beside her. Then he sat at the edge of the bed, scrolling through his phone, his back rigid. When he finally looked at her, his smile came easily but carried no warmth, and his gaze traveled over her once, unhurried, the way a man confirms the condition of something he already counts as his. The intimacy of the night had vanished, leaving a distance between them she could not explain.

Aisha reached for his hand, hoping to recover some trace of the man who had whispered about Rome. Alexei did not respond. He remained absorbed in his phone, as though she were no longer part of the room. Only hours earlier, every touch had seemed charged with meaning. Now his gaze was cold, his thoughts already elsewhere, while disappointment gathered silently inside her.

When nothing came, Aisha rose, exposed but unwilling to retreat. She crossed to where he sat and searched his face for some remnant of the man who had held her through the night. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she stepped between his knees and drew herself close. His eyes met hers briefly, then fell away. His hand moved to the small of her back, then lower, cupping her with a familiarity that should have felt intimate. Instead, the gesture was mechanical, possession without tenderness.

An awkward silence opened between them, colder than the silk sheets. The night now seemed less like a romance than a transaction disguised as one. Still, Aisha remained between his knees, her arms resting around his neck, unwilling to accept how completely he had withdrawn from her. *Is this really the end?* The thought felt impossible, a betrayal of everything she had believed only hours before.

When Alexei finally leaned in to kiss her, the gesture came too late. Aisha stiffened and pulled away. Something within her understood before her mind accepted it: whatever had existed between them during the night was already gone. She bent to retrieve her panties from the floor, each small movement making the distance between them more real.

They dressed in silence, every gesture stiff and brittle. Neither attempted to repair what had broken between them. When Alexei left the room, Aisha followed him into the pale morning light, her steps heavy, leaving behind the promises she had carried into the night.

The morning breeze carried the scent of fresh grass and coffee through the shops and cafés opening for the day, but none of it reached Aisha as comfort. She walked beside Alexei feeling strangely abandoned, though he remained only a few steps away.

They continued in silence as Rosocova awakened around them, each step carrying them farther from what they had shared.

They left behind the cobblestone rhythm of the main street and stepped into the park, an open expanse broken by patches of grass and low trees. Buildings hemmed the park on all sides, their ground floors cluttered with shop signs, cafés, and faded window displays.

"Talk to me," Aisha urged, hurrying to keep up. Benches and signs blurred past. Pigeons scattered in their wake.

"What just happened? Why are you acting like this? What did I do wrong?"

Alexei said nothing. Instead, he slowed and reached for her arm, pulling her close, leaning in for a kiss. She twisted free, breath sharp, and darted toward a narrow path between two patches of lawn.

Near the edge of the paved walkway, a man slumped against a brick wall, half-shadowed beneath the neon glow of a shop sign.

Lakita stood still in the half-shadow of the alley, blending effortlessly with the chaos of the street. She had learned the art of remaining unnoticed, her form dissolving into the flow of life

around her. Her sharp eyes traced Aisha's every movement with a detached focus. It wasn't only the girl's fate that held her attention; it was the tug of something familiar.

Aisha's heart was loud with indecision and a quiet fear. In her youth, Lakita had worn that same restlessness, that same dread of a wrong step. But Lakita had buried those fears long ago, drowned them beneath duty, beneath being the one who stood in the shadows guiding those who would never understand the true cost of power.

The irony did not escape her. She had once been like Aisha, untouched by the spiritual forces swirling around her, naive to the vastness of the world. Now she had become both participant and observer in this dance of fate, and the girl before her was a mirror she had no desire to face. Yet something kept her here: the hesitation, the rebellion against forces beyond comprehension. The same rebellion that had once nearly led Lakita astray.

Her thoughts broke off as her senses sharpened. A shift in the air, subtle as the flicker of a candle flame, drew her attention to the beggar at the edge of the park. She had passed him countless times before, seen him in different guises across lifetimes. Today he felt different.

Her mind reached out instinctively, a gentle touch against the weave of his past. Memories unfurled like tattered banners caught in the wind: a man who had sacrificed everything for the lives of others, only to be forgotten. He had fought, not for glory, but for survival, on a battlefield where angels were as real as the men he dragged from the ravine. His spirit had carried those moments quietly for decades, every life saved, every prayer

whispered over the dying, until the carrying itself became the wound. Sorrow. Regret. Scars no act of valor could close.

A slow breath left her. She had long ago learned to set down the burdens of others, to move beyond the need to intervene. Yet this man stirred something she thought she had left behind. Guilt, or pity; she could not tell. And no, it was not about him, not really. It was about Aisha, so distant from the very forces that shaped her. Could Lakita save her? Guide her? Or was the girl already claimed by something far greater than either of them could understand? Her gaze softened for a moment, then hardened again. She would not make the same mistake twice. She would not become the mentor who tried to fix what was beyond repair.

Still she watched the beggar's despair gather around him like weather. His hands, now weathered and cracked, had once held the promise of a future shaped by the dreams of his youth. Now they trembled in the cold. The wind was changing. Something stirred in him that he could no longer control. The decision sat against her ribs. She had walked away from battles, from attachments, from regrets, but a quiet question tugged at her heart: could she have saved him, too? Was it ever too late for redemption?

Her focus shifted. Aisha stepped through the park, oblivious to what moved around her. In a brief, unspoken frustration, Lakita blew a feather toward her: light, almost absurd, undeniable in its impact. How could the girl not feel it? How could she not sense the spirits, the currents shifting like shadows, threatening to pull her under?

The feather danced on the wind, its path deliberate and sharp. For a fraction of a second, Aisha's mind seemed to open, just

enough, and only for a moment. She blinked, then continued walking as if she had never been brushed by a spiritual hand. Lakita's jaw set. No one could make her see a truth she refused to acknowledge.

But the beggar's spirit was shifting, his fate beginning to bend, and Lakita knew she could not walk away. She could not let the world slip by unnoticed. Her spirit extended once more, tracing the lines of destiny through the air, touching the lives of those who passed unaware. It was not only about Aisha, though she was the chosen one. It was about everything: all the threads weaving together, coming undone.

A rusted tin cup trembled in his hands, the single coin inside making a soft, hollow clink. Around him, spirits gathered unseen, not out of pity, but in respect for one who had answered the prayers of the forgotten and, since youth, had prayed for others before himself.

From my vantage point, I watched Lakita gather, the way a raptor gathers before the drop. Across the square her presence was still, but her spirit extended: subtle, focused. She lingered on the wind, weighing her next move.

She had doubts, not about the task, but about Aisha's readiness. She questioned whether the girl could truly wield the power that came with this calling. Yet her awareness moved through the currents as if they were her own, tracing paths no mortal eye could follow. Whatever hesitation she had once owned had long since burned away.

Aisha and her companion passed the beggar without a word. No glance. No recognition.

Her fate was set, chosen by Essence. Chosen is not the same as ready.

An erratic high wind came out of nowhere, and great forces stirred around them. Lakita, feeling the shift, did not falter. She watched, as she had watched many times before.

But something inside the beggar cracked.

Years of frustration.

Untold injustices.

A lifetime of being unseen.

It surged to the surface, demanding release.

His shoulders stiffened. His jaw tightened. Breath steamed in the cool air. He had no plan, only the pressure clawing to escape. Then, with the suddenness of a snapped branch, instinct took over.

The tin cup slipped from his grasp, rattling across the pavement. His hand, fast and precise despite the grime, closed around a jagged shard of bottle glass before reason could intervene.

He lunged.

Everything slowed.

Aisha didn't see him.

But something did.

Across the square, Lakita stood still, yet her spirit moved. She whispered Essence's true name under her breath, once, only once, and the spirits of the air obeyed.

The beggar froze mid-strike, arms locked in place, gripped by unseen hands. His vision blurred. His breath came sharp and quick, confused by the betrayal of his own body. A force, light yet unbreakable, settled on his shoulders. And then, as if waking from a fever dream, he stopped resisting.

Aisha walked on, never knowing how close she had come to dying. Her spirit remained closed, deaf to the deeper currents swirling around her.

Later, the beggar would swear a cat had stopped him with a growl. A man watching from a second-story window insisted a branch had snapped above them, but there was no tree.

Ask the wind, and it would tell a different story entirely.

The withered old man stared at the cup, trembling, not from cold, but from the echo of something he could not name. Just seconds earlier, his cup had been empty. The breeze had overturned it.

Now it overflowed with coins.

He gathered himself and joyfully shuffled down the street, searching for a drink.

A man smoking by the bakery door claimed he saw the beggar vanish before reaching the corner, blinked out in an instant. A frightened girl on a bicycle remembered a cat crossing the street, then forgot what had startled her in the first place. An alley crow dropped a feather, black, with a single red tip.

Some things only looked like birds.

Aisha did not look back. Had she done so, she might have seen Lakita.

The wind, biting and sharp just moments before, now calmed. The change in weather hadn't altered the morning itself, only the eyes that witnessed it.

By the time they reached the Rosocova Inn & Café, the cold had burrowed deep into Aisha's bones. She stepped inside, shaking off the chill as warm, comforting smells of strong coffee, sweet

cassia cinnamon from southern China, and oven-warm rye bread rose to meet her, filling hollow places she'd nearly forgotten.

The room fell silent.

Chairs stopped scraping.

Cups paused mid-air.

A laugh froze halfway through.

A moment held its breath.

They all knew her.

Or thought they did.

To them, she was the girl who'd stolen from a wealthy family, the one rumored to be a witch, a thief, a temptress. No one ever asked how she'd come to be alone in Mondansk, cut off from her home in Punjab. Or how, as a teenager working as a nanny, she'd caught the eye of the wealthy man's son, who took what he wanted and left her pregnant.

No one knew how the family hushed it all up: how her baby vanished the night she was born.

No one knew how Aisha fought to find her daughter. Or how she was arrested for breaking into the estate where she believed her child was hidden.

Those stories never made their way into polite conversation.

Only the labels did.

And now she moved through Mondansk shadowed by rumors, reliant on Alexei, who had rescued her from prison but kept her passport locked away; who whispered promises and pressed soft kisses to her temple even as he tethered her life to his.

Her spirit knew there was a price.

With her companion behind her, holding the door, Aisha stepped into the café, not as the woman she truly was, but as the

story they preferred: a dangerous girl in a red dress, already guilty in their eyes.

Across the room, Bohdan Kuznetsov straightened, a broad smile spreading across his face. His black cotton apron, his name stitched in yellow thread, was spotless, ready for the morning rush. Bohdan co-owned the café with his sister, Anechka, who was also his mother, a truth carefully hidden from the well-connected town.

Years ago, when Anechka was only fourteen, Dovydas Kuznetsov, Bohdan's father, sent her away with his wife to the Baltics to conceal the pregnancy. She returned months later with a rehearsed story and a newborn presented as Dovydas's adopted son and her younger brother.

Now Bohdan ran the family's entertainment business with effortless charm and a shrewdness no one dared question.

"Good morning, Pan Alexei," Bohdan said warmly. "And who is this stunning young lady at your side?"

Alexei barely looked at him. "Aisha."

Aisha felt Bohdan's lingering gaze. His smile widened, revealing perfect white teeth.

"Such a beautiful name," he said, the words rolling gently off his tongue.

Aisha ignored him, letting her fingers drift over the intricate wood carvings along the wall.

"These remind me of my uncle's house in Punjab," she murmured. "He had something like this by his door."

Punjab. The word moved through her like a current. Her uncle's house. Her father's voice. And somewhere in that same geography, a grandchild who had never heard either. She pressed her

fingers against the carving and let the thought pass. There was nothing she could do about it standing here.

Bohdan's smile deepened. "I carve them myself. Scenes from India inspire me. You're welcome to visit my private collection sometime, if you'd like."

Aisha met his gaze, then looked away, her fingers fidgeting over the carving. A tear came; she wiped it away before anyone could see. There was something in Bohdan's eyes she had not expected: a warmth that felt genuine, an attentiveness that did not immediately ask for something in return. She recoiled when she felt it pull at her: not desire exactly, but longing for someone to see her, to stand between her and the cold, to make the distance she had traveled feel like it had led somewhere safe.

And beneath the warmth, something quieter. A feeling without a name: not fear exactly, not reason, not anything she could have explained if someone had asked. Just a subtle wrongness, the way a room can smell faintly of something burned long after the fire is out. She did not understand it. She did not trust it. She looked away.

Before she could respond, Alexei pulled her close. His grip around her waist was light but firm.

"Perhaps another time."

Aisha leaned into him instinctively.

Bohdan held her gaze a moment longer. "Of course." He turned to Alexei. "The usual?"

Alexei nodded.

"Pastries, coffee, and orange juice?" Bohdan asked.

Alexei gave a dismissive wave. "And syrniki."

Syrniki. At that word, Bohdan's eyes flicked toward him. The shift was small, too small for most to notice, but Aisha caught it. Not breakfast. A signal.

In Rosocova, nearly everything meant something else.

Syrniki wasn't just a pastry. It was a password.

Aisha didn't know its meaning. She didn't have to. She felt it in her bones: the air tightening, the silence stretching.

The code meant Anechka would meet Alexei later that evening, and between them, later always meant something worth waiting for. They were not simply lovers. They were the only two people in Rosocova who did not have to pretend to be something else when the door closed.

She Will Return

Early sunlight pooled across the café's tiled floor as Alexei and Aisha waited in silence. Each time the door swung open, a burst of cold air slipped inside. Guests jostled past, nudging them closer in a way that felt forced, too intimate. A sheen of sweat gathered on Aisha's forehead, the warmth doing nothing to ease the tightness coiling in her chest. She savored each breath of cold air drifting in from the street.

Then, from downstairs, shouting erupted: male voices, loud and slurred, bleeding sharply into the café's gentle hum.

On the small stage tucked into the café's rear, two men in fatigues faced off, rifles slung low across their backs. Their voices carried across the room, heated and blunt. More clash than conversation.

Aisha stiffened, breath catching as she angled for a better look. Something flared down her spine, a dread she felt as heat, leaving a taut ache in its wake.

A young man with shoulder-length curls glanced up, his gaze locking with hers for a moment too long. He liked what he saw: lean, watchful, disarmingly attractive. He caught the shift in her

posture, amusement flickering in his eyes. He handed off his rifle and threaded through the tables, moving with unsettling precision. People shifted instinctively, sensing him before seeing him.

He stopped a breath too close, his body heat brushing her skin. Sweat beaded at his brow, but his breathing stayed steady.

He lifted Aisha's hand and kissed it, light and lingering, his gaze never leaving hers.

"Lisitsyn," he said smoothly, offering his name. "Were you listening to our little debate?"

Aisha said nothing. A flicker crossed her face, curiosity or caution, as though she hovered between laughter and retreating behind the walls she'd built to survive.

Lisitsyn's smirk widened. "No? Then forgive us. My comrade blames a drunken foreigner for stealing his wife," he said lightly. "But Pasternak understood: war displaces people. Turns wives into exiles, poets into ghosts, even working girls into shadows. Don't you agree?"

He froze theatrically, eyebrow raised, before a tsunami of laughter crashed across the table.

Alexei leaned back beside Aisha, one arm draped over his chair. His smirk wasn't approval; it was possession. The kind that turns amusement into permission.

Then another figure approached: Vladimir, broad-shouldered, sharp-eyed. The room seemed to tighten around him.

"You put lips on her hand, Lisitsyn?" he snarled. "Christ, you're a fool."

Lisitsyn only laughed. "She's elegant. Why wouldn't I?"

"She doesn't belong here," Vladimir muttered.

Aisha met his gaze, calm and unapologetic. Her chin lifted slightly.

"You sound afraid."

Vladimir's lip curled, stung by a woman who dared respond. "People like you don't last long."

Alexei chuckled once.

All sound in the café died almost instantly.

From the candle sitting atop the covered piano, Lakita watched. Unseen. Unfelt.

Invisible, yet far from absent.

As far as unseen Controllers go, she played the silent observer well, almost as well as me. Her reach stretched far beyond sight. She read the twitch behind Alexei's calm. She caught the rot braided into his charm. She heard the air vibrating with the faint static that precedes a storm.

Something in the spirit stirred.

Essence had chosen Aisha, though Lakita doubted the choice. She had never trusted blind selection. There was always more beneath the surface. Always a cost.

Beneath the strength was something older, a weight Lakita could not immediately classify and therefore did not trust. Another reason, she thought, to question the selection.

Aisha, for all her strength, still believed survival was a matter of will: cleverness, effort, determination. Charming, in its way, but misguided. Lakita saw this clearly in the girl, though not in herself.

That was a mistake, and a dangerous one: Lakita underestimated Essence.

Survival does not care how hard you try. It never has. Often it is luck, fate, fortune. A fleeting spirit at work. Sometimes naughty.

Sometimes devious. Usually an ignorant miscreant later mistaken for an angel. Imagine that.

Lakita had watched long enough to know the girl would need pain to learn the truth.

The beggar had been a test. She'd interfered then, just a nudge. A small disruption.

But this was something else.

She leaned forward.

Not an intervention.

Not yet.

Just a push.

Lakita's thoughts thread outward, slipping into Alexei's mind like smoke.

She is already dangerously close to reprimand. Controllers are required to allow free will, even when mortals weaponize it against themselves.

She does not speak.

She does not command.

She listens, close, too close.

You crave her. She makes you feel powerful. They admire you more when she's on your arm.

These are Alexei's thoughts, rising in sequence. Lakita follows them like footsteps down a dark corridor.

But she doesn't want you. The rejection burns. You need to make her want you. And if you can't, no one else will.

She does not invent his hunger; she only brightens it, lets it burn where it already smolders.

As Lakita shifts her attention, something in Alexei tightens. His pupils narrow. His smile hardens, then tilts.

His gaze slides toward the corner.

Not in confusion.

In recognition.

Lakita goes still.

He sees her.

Not fully. Not by name. But something within him, something watching from the inside, knows.

Her breath slows.

This one is not just a vessel.

Something deeper rides within him.

Or perhaps, beside him.

His companions' laughter continues until Alexei cuts it short with a single look.

"We'll discuss everything when Medved arrives," he says smoothly. "Right now, I want to be alone with Aisha."

Vladimir's gaze lingers on her too long. A slow, deliberate crawl meant to provoke.

"Sure, Alexei. Spend time with your... friend."

Aisha says nothing. She doesn't flinch.

But inside, something sharp begins to take shape.

Aisha clenches her teeth as his gaze presses into her. She doesn't speak, but her eyes sharpen, accusing and cold.

"You don't love anyone," she murmurs, her voice quiet, but edged enough to cut through the air. The words aren't aimed at him alone. More a confession, a curse, something she needs to speak aloud to the spirits that might be listening. "You only like knowing no one else can have them."

Her gaze flicks to his, cold and unforgiving. But beneath the hardness something surfaces: an old hurt, buried deep, too raw

for Alexei to see. Perhaps he senses the pain he reignited this morning. Hers. The betrayal she has been hiding from too long, not ready to name, but there.

Alexei's smirk barely shifts, the corners of his mouth twitching with something like amusement. Without a word, he reaches toward her, his fingers brushing her cheek as he tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. The touch lingers, almost tender, but deliberate: a silent claim, an unspoken reminder of his control.

A single drop slips down her cheek, tracing the grief she refuses to acknowledge. She doesn't flinch. Her expression hardens, as if the tear itself were an enemy to conquer.

She pulls back, a laugh escaping her, dry and empty of humor, because a real laugh would take energy she no longer has to give.

"Is that what you call this?"

Alexei rises for a moment, signals for coffee with a lazy flick of his hand, then slides back into his seat. A slender, black-haired server with impeccable designer nails appears promptly, sets the cup before him with practiced efficiency, and vanishes into the background, almost unnoticed.

Aisha catches his eyes trailing the server as she walks away.

As his associates drift into their own conversations, Alexei keeps his eyes on Aisha, watching her in silence. He sets his cup aside slowly, his movements almost ritualistic. When he speaks, his voice is low, measured, tinged with a thin veil of irritation.

"How long are you going to stay angry? You know we're good together."

He reaches for her hand, not to comfort, but to examine her willingness. His grip is firm. A claim.

"Aisha, I want to keep you safe. Far from those who would destroy your family. Stay with me."

She laughs again, brittle, more of a subdued cackle, as if the sound could break if she pushed it too far.

Alexei's jaw tightens, a shadow crossing his face. He chooses his words, smooth and patient, but with a cold edge.

"It's never that simple."

"You have them." Her voice drops, low and deadly. "You are the government, Alexei. Don't sit there and tell me it's complicated."

He leans back, unshaken, his posture casual but commanding. The softness of his words is a weapon. "You're upset. And when you're upset, you twist things. You imagine enemies again. Maybe it's the stress, or the drugs. I never promised this would be easy. I only want to make you happy."

A bitter smile cracks across her face. "Happiness. Is that what you call it? Keeping me locked in a fancy room?"

"Happiness?" He tilts his head slightly, his gaze sharpening, almost amused. "It's clear you don't believe in that anymore. Perhaps safe and alive are all I can offer."

He squeezes her hand once, firm, then releases it slowly, as if letting go were a favor, an act of restraint on his part.

Aisha glares at him, her gaze cutting through the air as he caresses her hand. "Is this a threat? Are you threatening my family?"

He shakes his head slowly, his expression unreadable to those not attuned to the spiritual realm, dismissing her words as beneath him. I detect a shift in him, as though something within is being held in check.

A tense silence stretches between them.

"But..." Alexei pauses, his voice quieter now, steadier than she expects. "Do you even know what you want?"

Behind the answer she offers is the one she keeps: a daughter she has never seen, waking somewhere to a stranger's name.

"They're waiting for me to come home," she says, though the words falter in her heart. She is trying to convince herself. A tear gathers; she brushes it away, her voice softening. "My bauji loves me. My father loves me."

Aisha longs for the comfort of home, for the love of her family. But deep down she knows that even if she were free, it would never be the same.

Fire stirs in her chest, hot and sudden, her nostrils flaring, her eyes narrowing with a brutal clarity. The world, harsh and unyielding, presses in on her. Beneath the defiance, something trembles: disbelief, and the thin edge of breaking.

Aisha stares into Alexei's eyes, like she is looking down the barrel of a shotgun. "You know who my father is," she says, low, the words carrying across the silence between them.

"Your family forgot you." No hesitation, each word deliberate. "Arrested for theft, remember? If they truly cared, they would have come for you."

Her expression does not change, even as his words confirm what she already knew.

He leans back, his gaze steady. "Stay, and the worst won't touch you. I'll make sure of it."

"I don't believe you," she says, quiet and resolute, a defiance masking the doubt she can't shake.

Her hand trembles as she wipes the tear away, but then anger surges through her, sudden and violent. She slams her palm against the table, the crack of impact splitting the silence.

Eyes from a nearby table shift toward her. A single glance from Alexei sends them away again, as though the tension has become unbearable.

In the drinking glass beside Aisha, a reflection: a flash of dragon-leather boots. A flicker of movement.

Lakita. Watching, always.

"You think this is love? You think I'm happy here, owned, controlled, confined?"

Her gaze lifts to the window, not seeing it, but sensing something beyond it. A weight. A presence.

Alexei sets his cup down with deliberate care. "Such drama," he murmurs, his eyes narrowing with practiced amusement, as though her feelings entertain him more than they threaten him. "You get like this when you're bored."

He studies her a moment, his gaze calculating, as if measuring her every reaction. "Leave us and wait for me. I have a meeting, then the gym. Clear your head. Get a facial, a massage. I'll meet you at the spa."

Amid the clatter of cutlery, the murmur of porcelain, and the faint stirrings of small betrayals, something listens to the darkness of the man's thoughts.

Not Lakita. Something beneath her, and beneath him: a whisper among unsavory, malignant creatures of the dark. Ancient. Ugly, profound laughter.

My mentee is not happy.

A thought begins to form at the edge of Alexei's mind, familiar and unspoken. Entirely his own, or so he believes.

Lakita breathes life into it, shapes it, grounds it.

This moment belongs to her. A test. A turning point.

He blinks. Once. Again.

She belongs in the prison.

The laughter of the dark things grows louder, more hysterical.

Clarity settles in him like a breath finally exhaled.

Conviction hardens.

His fingers tap once against the porcelain, the sound deliberate.

His gaze never wavers from Aisha.

She will return. She will break.

With a sharp movement, Aisha stood. She snatched a syrniki off the tray and marched toward the staircase without a word.

She carried it out clenched in her fist, the little pastry that was never a pastry, the word Alexei had spoken to Bohdan made edible. She did not know she was carrying his message out the door. I did. It is the sort of thing I am left to notice alone.

As she disappeared, a burly man named Medved entered, grinning as he approached the table. "Another happy customer," he smirked.

Vladimir and Lisitsyn chuckled. Rising, they gave polite nods as Medved took the seat Aisha had just vacated.

A young waitress approached, bright-eyed, pretty, a red nametag pinned to her chest. She carried an envelope and a cigar. Alexei's eyes dipped, slowly, before returning to her gaze.

"Bella, is it?"

Color rose in her cheeks under his attention, her mouth softening. "Yes, sir."

"Thank you for bringing this to me. I won't need them now."

He opened his wallet and slipped a folded bill into her blouse pocket, fingers grazing fabric with deliberate slowness.

"Thank you," he added, voice low. His gaze lingered a second longer than necessary on the red button: seventeen, scrawled in Cyrillic like a designation, not a name.

The girl managed a bright smile, too quick, too practiced, and turned away. Anechka's idea, no doubt: personal deliveries meant personal vulnerability. Better tips. Worse consequences.

Alexei turned to Dmitri. "Tell Bohdan: number seventeen. My room this evening. And bring my cigar."

"Yes, sir," Dmitri replied, already on his way.

Alexei shifted his attention. "Medved! How's the family?"

"They're good, thank you. My nephew's been asking about you. Just got married. He's looking for work."

Alexei nodded thoughtfully. "If he's serious, I've got a factory opening in America. I'll give you a contact. Remind me before you leave."

Medved, Vladimir, and Lisitsyn shifted in their seats. The air thickened. No one spoke. Their eyes flicked between one another, waiting for Alexei to make his move.

He leaned back in his chair, fingers tapping a slow rhythm on the table. He scanned the room before pulling out a crumpled sheet, the scribbles on it half-faded, half-finished. With care, he unfolded it and traced the edge of the notes with a finger before glancing up, gaze sharp.

"Alright," Alexei said, his voice slicing through the stillness. "Let's get to it."

"First item of business. Lisitsyn says the Novyy Kazaks have been successful: stopping executions, smuggling prisoners out of the country."

Vladimir sneered. "Add them to the list. Take care of them before they become a real problem."

Lisitsyn's jaw tightened. "We don't touch Kazaks. That's not our business, and you know it. It's a death sentence. Hit them, and we'll be looking over our shoulders for the rest of our lives."

Medved leaned forward, sneering. "Kazak women? Bohdan wouldn't turn them down."

He glanced at Vladimir, who was stabbing a toothpick between his teeth. Then Medved grinned.

"Personally, I wouldn't fuck a Kazak gal with Vladimir's crooked dick."

A few short laughs. One snort. Then silence. Long and awkward. Alexei stirred his coffee, gaze resting on Vladimir.

"No Kazaks," he said flatly.

He took a slow sip.

"We focus on the real threat. Lisitsyn, continue."

Lisitsyn cleared his throat. "The rebels are nearing Rosocova. One of my contacts in Lviv said their house got raided last week."

Medved frowned. "They're close. Just hours away. And they're good: trained by Russian special forces. I don't think we'll last a minute unless we put together a proper fighting unit."

Alexei exhaled sharply. His voice cut through the room, not angry, just final. "Medved, we don't have time. They'll be on us by week's end. We shut down preemptively, before they get too close."

Medved blinked. "Shutdown? What do you mean, Alexei?"

Alexei leaned back, tapping a quiet rhythm against the table. "I'm taking care of business before it takes care of us. Let's not wait around to find out what happens."

Lisitsyn shifted in his chair. "We're secure. No one knows this place even exists... right?" His voice wavered.

I noted the waver. He already knew the answer. He had told someone. But his comrades did not seem to realize it, and they usually detect deceit.

Alexei studied him. "Your funds are safe. And gold keeps climbing. There's more in the accounts than we projected."

Lisitsyn didn't answer. He didn't have to. The room tilted, ever so slightly. Money has a way of making everything feel justified.

Vladimir leaned in. "How much have we made so far?"

"Fourteen million," Alexei said. "A piece."

Glasses clinked.

"We're finished after this."

Lisitsyn's voice slid in, almost hopeful, almost ashamed. "Unless someone wants to keep going."

Heads shook. A silent pact.

"Execution in three days," Lisitsyn finished.

No one flinched.

"To us," Vladimir said, lifting his glass with a gleam in his eye.

Their glasses clinked. A sound too clean for the business at hand. The room blurred, nothing existing beyond their shared triumph.

Alexei glanced toward Lisitsyn. "Did you prepare everything?"

Lisitsyn nodded. "Yes, warden. We've got the last five arriving. The prisoners will be ready by eight."

No one reacted. They'd done this countless times. They'd all done worse. It was just another job.

But Medved broke the silence. "And the girl?"

Alexei nodded. "I'll bring her at three."

A beat. A flicker of something almost human. Then it was gone.

"Process her like the others. This is our last job. I'll move them one by one to a new cell in two days, promising reprieve."

Lakita watched. Waited.

This kind of promise, the illusion of reprieve, was always the sharpest knife.

She had seen it before. Hope turned to ash.

Aisha would learn this too.

Not yet. But soon.

Their laughter reached her, greasy shadows, thick with unseen rot. She inhaled the moment like smoke. It reeked of decay.

She hovered near Medved's thoughts, where appetite and cruelty already curled together.

The image surfaced, dark and glib. Soup.

He barely paused before speaking.

"We could use soup."

Laughter erupted.

Alexei grinned. "Sure, we can use soup. We did that a few months ago."

He stood, slapping the table.

"Medved, Lisitsyn, handle the prisoners. Make it clean."

He buttoned his coat.

"I'll be in Rosocova with Anechka. Back in two days."

Then, with a smirk to Vladimir:

"And you owe me varenyky."

The meeting fractures. The men rise without ceremony.

They move toward a hidden room off to the side, a concealed exit that opens only from within.

Medved, Lisitsyn, and Vladimir shed their civilian disguises, retrieving ammunition and supplies. Coats fall away. Boots thud on stone. With practiced hands, they load weapons, strap on vests.

Names drop like dead weight.

In their place: Bear. Fox. Wolf.

The enforcers of the underground prison.

Clad for the hunt, they step into the light: no names, no past.

Somewhere nearby, the ritual has already begun.

On Rosocova's silent streets, five prisoners shuffle forward in clanking chains.

Their ankles are raw where iron has rubbed them bare. One limps. Another keeps glancing over his shoulder, eyes wide with dread.

Armed escorts flank them, rifles at ease, but ready.

They pass through a park once known for its beauty: stone paths now cracked, flowerbeds overgrown, a rusting swing creaking in the breeze.

Birds still sing. A cruelty.

Above them, the golden dome of Tserkva of St. Nicholas blazes beneath the rising sun, the light unearned and merciless.

Around them, shaded trees offer no shelter. The bright flowers, no comfort.

Inside, the altar waits. It offers no salvation.

Five walk toward it now. A sixth is promised for three o'clock. None of them chose the hour. The world has already chosen for them.

Embrace the Dark

A Shaanxi heavy-duty truck rumbled to a stop behind the church. Twilight pressed low. Five hooded figures were hurled from the bed. They struck a straw mat with a hard thud, limbs stiff, breath broken, a low guttural groan rising and dying in the cold.

In the half-light, armed soldiers emerged from the shadows. One seized a prisoner and yanked the hood tighter around his bowed head. With fluid, mechanical precision, each captive was hauled upright by his irons, dragged from the mat, and chained to the next by the neck. They were prepared to march in silence.

For the moment, they were left face-down in the dirt, waiting for the shift to change.

Many lives had rooted themselves here, giving history a place to cling. The truck sat half-hidden in the brush beside an old path where warriors were ambushed, women raped and slaughtered, children hacked and scattered. Their ghosts still moved among the pines, shadows thick with the memories that saturate this ground.

Before that time, the kinder spirits had more to cleave to here. A stream still ran, cold and faithful, carrying reflections of trees and slivers of sky. Lovers once held each other beneath scattered moonlight, breath quick, hearts pounding, the world narrowed to only them. Families gathered on the wooden bridge to fish, to dream, to remember. Some spirits still lingered: elders walking hand in hand among the trees, others drifting through the water. But the living no longer returned. Not since the war. Not since memory itself had begun to thin.

When the sun finally rose and early mass was dismissed, the new shift emerged from the church. Many of the soldiers attended the early morning service, seeking solace. A soldier took his place on the perimeter, relieving the one who had kept watch through the night. Vladimir adjusted the strap of his rifle. His eyes swept the hills, not the prisoners. He had long since stopped seeing them, whether from mercy or something colder, he no longer knew.

Shackled at the neck, the figures stumbled forward. Iron boxes hung from their necks, dangling against their chests, clanging with each step, a harsh toll, like a bell unwilling to be rung. They had been woken in darkness. Wrists and ankles bound. Black cloth was taped across their throats, sealing the bag over their heads, reducing the world to near-black, not to silence them, but to erase them, to strip away the last trace of who they were.

No words were spoken. Only the stench of diesel and the cold press of restraints, closing in.

The prisoners were led down the cracked Path of Sunflowers, called Podsolnukhov by the villagers. The wildflowers bent as they

passed, dropping low, silent witnesses to a land still crowded with spirits.

Ahead, the church rose, its wide stone steps heavy with stillness. Behind it, a narrow path curved toward the graveyard. Tactical trucks flanked the entrance, engines coughing to life in the pale hush of dawn. Their guttural growl tore at the silence, clawing at the cold.

A light tank crouched beneath a fraying tarp, its turret stowed, its barrel buried in the earth, as if meant to disappear.

No one spoke.

But I sensed the preparations.

Not just boots and engines.

The spirit layer tightened, a stillness bracing for the storm.

And above it all, as the living moved about their grim preparations, I whispered the names of the dead, those history had forgotten. The water, the soil, the trees answered, though the humans did not hear. I prayed so heaven would not forget. This was no fleeting prayer, but one drawn from a Controller's soul. I trusted that if it was heard, it would not be ignored.

Almost immediately, I sensed a shift, a loosening, a quiet relief, as though a presence brushed past me. Then, a kiss of affirmation. I had come to trust such moments, not as proof, but as permission to continue, even when what was confirmed unsettled what I once held as certain. I had learned to look beyond observation, and to listen for what the spirit reveals.



I did not seek this man, but his spirit rose like a flare in the dark, calling for witness. And Camille told me to go there. That much is a given.

It was then, as the cries of the forgotten settled back into the earth, that I saw him: a slender yet strong man, Ahmad, moving with his head held high among the condemned. His eyes were veiled, but his soul lay open to any who could see beyond flesh and fear. I saw him clearly, not because I sought him, but because I had once been like him, and now linger only in spirit, drawn to moments just before endings.

He was embracing the dark now. Heat pressed on his shoulders, but no light reached him. Within, faith had curdled into guilt. It coiled in his chest like a slow poison: the cost of surviving when others had not, the cost of doubting mercy.

But his deepest wound was not what he had done to himself. It was his son.

Ahmad had brought the boy to Mondansk from Kabul, not only to save him from the consequences of his actions, but to seek some last echo of humanity, to pass on what little wisdom war had not burned away. The irony was bitter: the boy received his inheritance in full, a measure of his father's terror. No act of penance could undo that.

Behind him, the boy's breath came quick and high, barely muffled by the cloth over his mouth. Though grown in years, he was unready for what awaited him. Few ever are.

Look closely. This is where the truth begins to show itself.

Beyond the barricades, strewn across broken concrete and warped crates, lay the artifacts of yesterday's violence: a rusted American helmet, the shattered stock of a rifle, a strip of Chinese camouflage tangled in thornweed. Rainwater pooled in shell craters, oil-slick and foul.

Once, battles raged here.

During the final surge, female warriors from Hong Kong and mainland China, *nǚ shā shǒu*, were sent by the Triads to infiltrate the city's fragile infrastructure. They wore special uniforms designed to disarm and distract, a mockery of battlegear. Knives were hidden behind silk and skin. They were housed and supported by Anechka Kuznetsov, who introduced them to Romani caravans camped near the railway lines. From there, they learned to move unseen, to speak in whispers and riddles. By night, they traded drink and comfort to foreign soldiers. By dawn, they left behind slit throats and silence.

Decades later, those same women, some of them, their daughters, own Rosocova's most profitable businesses. They wear perfume now instead of blood, and are no less feared.

Brothels became spas. Safehouses turned to dispensaries. The city, still pocked with betrayal, wears their fingerprints like scars that never healed. On certain nights, when even the stars and moon withhold their light and the birds have turned their gaze, the knives come out again.

The city does not forget the hands that bled or built it. Ahmad walked through it like a man returning to the site of his undoing. The boy clung to his father's silhouette, unsure whether he was being led or already left behind.

This place was once a promise. Now, its ghosts drift among weeds and wires, waiting. The boy does not see them yet. But he will.



To understand what awaited the condemned, one must understand the land beneath their feet.

Rosocova was not always a place of iron and silence. Once, its people danced around bonfires and gathered apricots from sun-warmed orchards. They believed their children would roam these fields in peace.

Peace did not survive the march of flags. Foreign soldiers came with their battle cries. The North Koreans shouted, "Sae salm wihae!" The Turks yelled, "Yeni bir hayat için!" Americans, Slavs, Pakistanis, Chinese, mercenaries, all of them, came speaking of freedom, each chasing the illusion of a new beginning. What they delivered was conquest.

Thousands perished, not by rebel bullets or hidden mines, but at the command of guns meant to secure the land. Police became soldiers. Soldiers became police. Graves were carved into every hillside, hurried and unmarked. Even now, the earth stirs with their unrest.

The living learned to survive by looking away. They raised their hands to the invader's voice, not in loyalty, but in resignation.

What followed was not war, but erasure. The conquerors brought machines: bullets that hunted their chosen targets, un-

manned tanks that flattened homes without pause, drones skimming rivers like mechanical birds.

Even the smallest creatures were repurposed, bats wired to drop explosives with precise, indifferent aim.

Mechanical soldiers had no spirit. Augmented by algorithms, they followed orders without question. Some were called Pointers, four-legged units engineered to detect borders and bodies that no longer mattered. Others, Pit Bulls, were released to reduce villages to silence. The Translators arrived armored, shaped like pandas, bulletproof and unblinking. They spoke our words, but never our truths, issuing clipped demands through mouths of alloy.

The Chinese troops, mostly conscripts, feared more than they were feared. The Americans came younger still, clutching medals for deeds too grim to recall. Their uniforms conferred the illusion of authority. Their technology ruled. None of them did.

They enforced only what the world allowed in silence. All that remains of that storm is wreckage. A light tank, its treads scorched, its turret caved in, rests beneath a hillside, hidden by overgrowth. Locals pass it in silence. It is not a relic. It is a warning.

Some in Rosocova welcomed the Black Brigade. When they arrived, the Americans withdrew. A few stayed behind, taking Chinese wives. Remarkably, gadje among the retired warriors were accepted, even by the most traditional Romani clans. Life went on. Even the wounded learned to adapt. Survival, after all, is a comforting salve for the broken. But most understood: this was not salvation. It was desecration wrapped in discipline.

But the story of how Rosocova was settled meant little beside the fate of those in chains that day. History fell silent. Only the present remained.

The prisoners walked a narrower path, veering from stone to soil, beside a brook that chattered despite the silence it carried.

Their hoods rippled in the breeze. In the moving water, their reflections fractured into something less than human.

Overhead, birch trees bowed in seasonal transition, leaves flickering like embers in a long-cold hearth. Sunflowers lined the trail, their faces turned downward, heavy with seed and shame.

The cicadas hummed in steady waves, oblivious to the dread below. A cool breeze stirred the sweat on their skin, carrying the scent of wildflowers and earth, and beneath it, a sharp trace of blood yet to be spilled.

Then came the clearing. The five were driven into a rancid room where light trembled overhead, unwilling to witness what followed.

The air sagged with damp decay, old sweat, and something acrid no cleansing could lift. They were ordered to strip: clothes, shoes, the last symbols of their past lives.

They were handled with cruelty, not for necessity, but for sport. A sport with no rules but narcissism. The rituals of control masqueraded as order, but existed only to degrade. They called it protocol. It was not. It was cruelty.

They were no longer prisoners, not in the eyes of their captors. Even beasts led to slaughter are granted more reverence. They were condemned.

From behind a partition, razors hissed, not yet screams, but something closer. The sound was more intimate than any cry. It

did not ask. It did not warn. It simply took flesh, carving itself into memory.

And then came the waiting.

An hour crawled by. Time moves slowly in places built to extinguish hope.

This, I have seen before. And I will see it again. Not because it must be so, but because mortals forget. Carbon forgets.

They forget the cost of silence. Of obedience. Of believing that evil only arrives in the form of monsters, and not men in uniform, smiling beneath flags.



Then came the sound: boots in cadence, heavy and deliberate, echoing down the corridor. New guards had arrived.

They entered with precision, mechanical in motion, faceless in intention. Men honed by repetition, emptied of hesitation. Their bodies wore the posture of duty. Their souls, I could not find.

At the threshold, they paused. Taped to the wall beside them was a handwritten sign: No female officers beyond this point.

Once, women moved through these halls, watching, restraining, punishing. Their presence did not trouble the warden, nor their cruelty. That, he permitted freely. But brutality that scarred the body in undesirable ways threatened profit. Certain violations diminished the trade value of his human inventory. For that, and only that, he acted.

When several female officers refused to adjust their conduct to his revised "standards," he reassigned them. Not as punish-

ment, but as possession. They were placed beneath his direct command, where defiance could be redirected or consumed.

This was the warden's design: a fortress of calculated torment, informed by the worst histories of his kind. He modeled the prison on the broken legacy of Black Dolphin and reshaped it into something more efficient. Less visible.

To enforce his will, he formed the Black Brigade. Not soldiers. Not keepers. Instruments. They were loyal enforcers: blood-bound, indoctrinated, selected for the kind of loyalty that makes men forget themselves. Their brotherhood was forged not in shared belief, but in obedience to a doctrine too rigid for mercy.

But even cruelty evolves. Where pain was once spectacle, loud, theatrical, messy, it was refined. The lash gave way to silence. Execution replaced torture. Pain was no longer a hammer, but a scalpel.

What broke men now was not the body, but the self. Torment continued. It changed form. Words, isolation, the grinding weight of unpredictability replaced the scream and the blow. A quiet mastery of fear took its place, not to punish, but to reshape.

And so, the victims, already stripped of dignity, were dismantled further by unseen means.

This was the new law. Not written in charters or spoken aloud, but felt, etched into the bones of all who walked these halls.



And while cruelty marched onward, the man called Ahmad Bajwa fell inward.

For some prisons are made of walls. Others of memory.

There are moments when memory returns not as thought, but as judgment.

As Ahmad sat in silence, the past rose within him, unyielding and cold. In that quiet hour, he remembered why he had come to Rosocova.

He was born Bajwa, a Sikh of the Punjab, in a village where the gurdwara bell and the call to prayer shared the same morning air. The faith of his fathers did not survive his youth. The new one arrived with a borrowed book and a recruiter's patient voice, and he took the name Ahmad the way a man takes a door out of a burning house: gratefully, without reading what was written on it. Kabul first. Then Serbia.

He arrived in Serbia as a fighter, a mujahid burning with belief, convinced jihad meant protecting the innocent. But belief, once passed into mortal hands, is easily twisted. He watched men invoke God as they brutalized civilians. Then came the night of the raid, when he fired blindly into the dark and struck a child, a local girl. After that, he left. His faith trailed behind him like smoke.

In the days that followed, he fled the fighters, their false promises, and the wrath he believed awaited him, both earthly and divine. He left Serbia convinced that Allah would never forgive him. Still, he tried to make amends, leaving money and a note at the family's door. But the girl's father read the words and set the money ablaze. Grief cannot be bought. It cannot be bribed.

Years passed. He married again. When his second wife, Mariam, bore him a daughter, Zainab, he took it as a sign: a second chance. Together they tried to return home to Punjab, seeking safety with

her family. But at the border, they were detained for no reason given.

That night, masked men came and took his wife and child. Faceless. Silent. A woman's scream tore through the air, then vanished into the roar of a departing engine, the screech of skipping tires, and the glare of a truck's headlights.

Ahmad found them at dawn. Two bodies. Ripped clothing. Multiple stab wounds each. No words left behind.

And in that silence, he understood: he had taken an innocent child's life.

And now, in divine balance, his own child and wife had been taken.

Ahmad fled once more, this time in a rusted sedan, barely alive. Months later, he arrived in Rosocova, a ghost in human shape. The town welcomed him with warm bread and quiet streets, and for a time, the illusion of peace returned. He found breath again, and in its quiet rhythm, he felt Allah's presence and the stirrings of Salah, the five daily prayers, once more.

When his son from an earlier marriage came to live with him, Ahmad dared to hope. He painted walls. He planted mint. He taught the boy how to slice fruit without waste. It was a fragile life, stitched together by grace.

In time, he shared the story of this redemption with Lakita, a young Master Controller, not yet weathered by the weight of so many broken stories.

That is the way of Guardians: we carry the sorrow of others, and we are not afforded the luxury of withholding compassion or turning from the burden.

"I sat beneath a tree," Ahmad told her, his voice quiet. "I thought Allah had turned His face from me. That my doubts, my weakness, my sins... had made me unworthy of mercy."

He paused. Then offered a verse: *'Despair not of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins.'*

"Even in a place like this," he said, "that verse haunts me. Like a whisper in the dark."

He claimed the spirits of the tree had spoken to him. I heard nothing but wind, and the groan of an old nag I'd seen graze for years beneath the shade of this oak. But for him, that silence was a reply.

Ahmad laid down prostrate and began to recite Surah Al-Fatiha. A latent spirit stirred, and something erupted from his heart, not in words, but in a knowing deeper than language.

"Yā Raḥmān, Yā Raḥīm:

*O Most Merciful, Most Compassionate,
You did not spare me because I am pure.
You spared me because You are Merciful.*

*This breath I take, this moment of stillness,
is from You. A mercy. Not a reward, but a chance.
A path back. A way out from the landslide of guilt.
Not to forget,
but to be made whole again.*

Yā Latīf, You are Gentle in what You allow.
You do not erase consequence.
You do not withhold lessons.
The blade, the wound, the ache that lingers:
these, too, are from Your wisdom, not Your wrath.

*Sometimes, Your salvation is not loud.
It is the quiet strength to rise again.
The arms that still move.
The eyes that still weep.
The heart that still chooses compassion.
Rabb, do not let this suffering make me bitter.
Let it make me aware.
Aware of my need for You.
Aware of my son's fear.
Aware of the One who makes broken things whole.
Yā Tawwāb, O Acceptor of Repentance:
I return to You.
Not because I am worthy,
but because You invite the unworthy.
And I have come.
Āmīn."*

The vision dimmed, and the past released him.
Ahmad rose from memory into the moment that had brought him here.



Ahmad was not yet ready to live a life of righteousness.

In a moment of carelessness, perhaps shaped by loneliness, perhaps by longing, he took his son to an underground betting ring. He meant no harm. A quiet instinct told him to wait, to turn back, but he wanted to give his boy a memory that wasn't born

of sorrow. Just a brief escape, a flawed father's attempt to feel human again.

And that night, they came.

Men in plain jackets, polite in the way only predators are polite. They claimed to be immigration officers. They were not. They were the Black Brigade: the local police, obedient to power and indifferent to innocence.

They took prisoners that night. Ahmad and his son were not among them. A folded bill pressed into a gloved palm, a guard who suddenly found the far wall interesting, and they walked out into the cold air, alive and warned.

Once, Rosocova had felt like home.

He remembered cobblestones humming beneath his steps, laughter rising from open windows, the scent of spring blossoms mingling with fresh bread. Neighbors smiling with open eyes.

But belonging is fragile.

Fear reshapes it. Time hollows it out. And what once welcomed can become a place that forgets you.

Now Ahmad stood as little more than an echo: a father without a name, a soul without weight.

They herded him and the others into a cell with a ceiling too low for dignity. The walls sweated mold. The bulb overhead flickered like a reluctant eye, casting long shadows across fractured stone.

A rifle jabbed his spine. Another hand shoved him forward.

Ahmad's breath hitched.

He could not see his son, but he felt him. Felt the terror trembling through the air, imagined the wide-eyed stare behind the hood. His knees weakened. Still, he moved.

Stripped of possessions.

Stripped of standing.

Stripped of meaning.

Far down the corridor, a razor scraped slowly over stone, sharpening, not for need, but for message.

It was a quiet sound, almost intimate.

Not a scream, but something worse.

It reminded Ahmad that he was not only a victim.

He was a man with blood in his past: a man who once fired blindly into the dark and struck a child.

And he understood now:

the blade comes for more than the victim, cuts deeper than flesh.

It is double-edged and unforgiving,

a stain that will not come clean.

And as he stood in that stench-filled room, alone among shadows and silence, a single thought pressed into him like a bruise:

How could he ever tell these men what he had done... or what they were doing?

The thought vanished almost as soon as it formed.

Because even before its echo faded,

he felt the blade back in his hands.

Cold.

Comfortable.

Certain.

As if it had never left him at all.

He was waiting.



Ahmad should have listened to his spirit.

People call it conscience, but conscience is only the mind talking to itself: mental self-soothing, mental scolding, mental gymnastics. Nothing more than thoughts churning in circles. Mental masturbation without a happy ending. *I sound like Ikart.*

A spirit operates differently. A spirit, for example, a Guardian: sees what moves beneath the surface, knows what approaches before the physical world gives it shape and tells the physical assignment. Just as the wind comforts the earth, humans can hear from their Guardian who resides within their soul.

Ahmad had heard from his Guardian several times that evening.

He felt the warning.

He recognized the hesitation.

He ignored it.

Three weeks later, he and his son attended a vigil, though in truth, it was more than that. Those on the surface called it prayer, remembrance. But beneath the language of mourning, another current flowed.

It was a quiet rebellion.

A gathering of the displaced, of those whose lives had slipped beyond the state's official records, whose grief no longer belonged to any government ledger. For one night, they emerged. For one night, they allowed themselves to believe the world could be otherwise.

The vigil honored a Chinese man, publicly condemned as a thug, a traitor, an outsider. He had been hanged in the square, the rope left to sway long after his breath had gone. Until dead, the authorities announced, as though death were paperwork requiring verification.

But the park that night told another story.

Evening settled heavily over the park, but its spirits refused to be smothered. Beneath dim street lamps, the place pulsed with defiant life. A woman in scarlet laughed as she bartered affection with broken men. A preacher lifted her voice in righteous fury, words trembling yet resolute. The scent of spice and tobacco curled upward, mingling with the night air. Men leaned over chessboards, their whispers masked by the tap of wooden pieces, a quiet choreography of strategy.

Near the benches, figures bartered beneath the shelter of trees. Small exchanges. Small risks. In another corner, glasses clinked in muted toasts. And beneath it all: laughter, light and fleeting, like birds startled into flight.

Even joy can be an act of resistance.

As the hour grew late, the pretense faded.

What remained was no longer a memorial. It was a fragile, flickering world, tenuous as a flame in the wind. A space reclaimed, if only for a heartbeat, from the machinery built to erase it.

Then, without warning, the world cracked.

There were no sirens. No barked commands. Only the sharp percussion of gunfire and the shriek of silence breaking.

The secret police, the Black Brigade, arrived like a curse given flesh. No insignia. No procedure. Only violence. Panic rippled

outward. Shadows scattered. But escape was a direction, not a possibility.

Those with proper papers were ushered past with barely a glance.

Citizenship was a kind of armor, thin but effective.

The rest were claimed without ceremony.

Ahmad.

His son.

Six others.

Taken. Not tried. Not questioned. Simply absorbed into the state's open mouth.

The woman in scarlet was among them.

She did not run.

She did not scream.

They dragged her into a tent with another woman.

Only one emerged again, zipped into a body bag.

The woman in scarlet was not seen afterward.

Not slain.

Not dragged.

Simply gone, as though the night itself had folded her into its seams.

The boy was separated from Ahmad that same night. I did not follow him. Some losses belong to their fathers alone: to carry, to name, to grieve in whatever silence remains after everything else has been taken.

The Girl in the Scarlet Dress

The prison door stands like a silent sentinel, neither guarding nor guiding, simply enduring, indifferent to what passes through or what is taken.

When the warden prods Aisha forward, the stale air ripples, a small disturbance, enough to pause the breath of the other prisoners. Humans often betray themselves this way, when curiosity brushes against wounded pride. They recognize her from the underground event, the girl in the scarlet dress on the night of their arrest. Even disheveled, with mascara streaked in dark lines across her cheeks, her raw beauty refuses to disappear beneath the grime.

Hassan offers a small, uncertain smile. It lingers a moment too long.

Aisha does not react, but a quiet relief rises in her at the sight of a familiar face.

Ahmad notices and feels only dread.

Misplaced.

Grotesque.

Like laughter at a funeral, absurd against the clumps of his son's hair scattered across the cold floor, remnants of innocence, ground beneath boots.



As a guard finishes shaving Hassan's head, the warden shoves Aisha into line, between Ahmad and his son, severing the fragile thread that had held father and boy together.

She has been absent since their capture, and now her sudden return carves a stark silhouette into the dim room. Her knees buckle under a weariness only terror and deprivation can breed. She steadies herself. Something dormant stirs, small, sharp, deliberate. She draws her fear inward and locks it deep, where even the warden cannot reach.

Her hand moved once, briefly, barely, to the notebook in her coat. Still there. She let it go.

Her face becomes her armor.
She raises her shield.

The warden circles her. Predatory.

Ahmad watches, unblinking. Not unseen, simply disregarded.

With practiced ease, the warden strips away Aisha's outer garment and underwear, handing them off without ceremony. Among the things handed off without ceremony: a notebook. The warden did not look at it. He did not need to. It went with everything else. His touch is efficient. Rehearsed. Bored.

Through the fog in her mind, Aisha remembers: it was only two nights ago. Only that. Since she felt the tenderness of this same

man. Now he stands before her as a despicable old creature with a cold, unrecognizable heart. It feels like another life entirely.

How had she ever invited those hands? Those eyes? That thing into—

She fixes her gaze on a point beyond the room, sealing the thought shut before it can finish forming. The pain behind it waits: shapeless, patient, inevitable. She will not touch it. Not now.

Ahmad cannot look away. He doesn't know what Aisha is to his son, or what she was, other than another prisoner. She certainly seemed different. Treated differently. And now she stands here, stripped bare before them all. Rage rises in him at the indignity, an indignity even the worst of humanity did not deserve. It rises hot, useless, bitter.



He sees her eyes, still as stone, but distant.

Her mind slipping, retreating, an erosion of self.

At the edges of her awareness, her thoughts begin to fracture, opening just wide enough for a Guardian to enter.

Lakita steps in commanding darkness to fold around Aisha. Aisha is suspended in thick, sticky gel, encased in a bubble, like an embryo waiting for rebirth. Aisha has entered the spirit-realm.

I am impressed with Lakita's innovation.

Most of my students prefer the familiar: burning bushes, translucent figures claiming old bonds. Some favor intimidation, becoming beasts or monsters to provoke obedience.

Lakita, though, designs intimacy. Quiet, cloistered initiation. I note it for future lectures.

I step into the darkness beside Aisha's bubble and brush the fringe of her soul. I veil myself carefully; neither mortal nor Celestial, not even Lakita will sense me. The dark is thick. Tactile. Like water with weight. Lakita is not drowning. Nor dissolving. Then, a whisper, of sorts. Not sound. Presence.

A shimmer drifts at the edge of Aisha's vision: Lakita's aura.

Celestials imprint as color in the carbon mind:

Sometimes sharp white.

Sometimes green.

Non-humans welcome it.

Humans often fear it.

Aisha does not.

A shape steps forward, not arriving, but revealing, as though it had been waiting for her notice.

Her form begins to unravel. Waxen. Trembling.

She stretches, then folds inward, flickering like a candle in violent wind. Moving outside her bubble but she is still held there by the gel around her.

And then: light.

Not flame.

Not heat.

Something aware.

Something patient.

She reaches. Her fingers distort, twisting, warping. When they touch the light, ice tears through her like a storm.

She is snapped free.

Not backward.

Not forward.

Out.

She falls into a void without floor or sky.

Silence condenses around her.

Then, metal.

Chain.

A ringing felt more than heard, each vibration a drumbeat carved into bone.

A figure forms:

an angelic woman dressed in deep green.

Lakita. Laughing for a moment.

She does not speak at first. She paces. Observes.

Not cruel. Not kind.

Weighing.

Measuring.

Aisha tries to speak. Her lips will not move.

The message is simple:

Not yet.

Lakita's voice comes smooth and cold, silk pulled taut.

"Tell me, why would the Essence waste its time on you?"

The question wounds more than Aisha expects despite not having a clue what this Essence has to do with her. And who is this in front of her.

Her answer surfaces unbidden:

"Lakita."

The name lands before its meaning returns.

"I don't know why I was sent to watch you," Lakita says. "I was told to test you. So far, I am not impressed."

Aisha flinches.

"Am I... stuck here?" The words crack like thin ice.

Lakita starts to probe her body looking for something mumbling to herself, "You should have stayed in the bubble."

Without looking at Aisha and continuing to poke her, she says, "You are not where you belong," Lakita replies. "That is not a warning. It is a fact."

The dreamscape trembles. Reality presses at the seams. A thin crack forms, silent and expanding.

Lakita softens only slightly.

"Essence leads me to you. I don't yet know why. But then, why does Essence choose any of us?"

She does not move, yet she is suddenly before Aisha.

Aisha stumbles. Her temple strikes something impossible. Pain blooms, sharp and real. Lakita steadies her, preventing true harm but not the sting.

A test.

A jest.

Aisha stares at this being, shocked that she would trip her purposefully.

Lakita places her gently on unseen ground.

"When the time comes," she says, "the path will be there, if you want to try and walk it."

Cold rushes over Aisha, rattling bone.

"Where am I now?" she asks.

"Somewhere you cannot stay."

A pause. Almost tender.

"When the time comes, you will find me."

Then softer:

"Essence chose me to guide those who can fill the voids left by the gods' careless conflicts."

And a whisper like smoke:

"Assuming that day ever comes."

The world buckles.

The dream dissolves.

As she falls, she hears one word:

"Remember."

Spirit returns to skin like cold water flung onto burning coals.

Then nothing.

Then stone.



Aisha's eyes snapped open.

The weight of the prison rushed over her like a cold tide. The dreamscape, the green haze, Lakita's voice, dissolved like smoke.

What remained was breath, stone, and silence.

She composed the entry without paper, the way she had learned to hold things she could not afford to lose. Somewhere in the hours before the gathering, before the arrest, before any of this, she had written: I do not know what you look like. I do not know your name. I know only that you exist, and that knowing is enough to keep me moving. She held the words in the place where

the notebook had been. They would do until she could write them down again.

Lakita did not speak. She watched.

And I wonder, not for the first time, whether even we, the Witnesses, are being watched in turn.

This thought was first brought to me by an Aegean Alchemist whose name I never bothered to remember. He asked if knowing I was observed would change me: my color, my behavior.

A stupid question, I thought.

But still, I considered it.

At first, the feeling of being under a microscope was abhorrent, violating.

Then, numbing.

In time, I stepped into the role of the observer myself. And from that vantage, a new question emerged:

What is the state of mind of the one who watches?

Eventually, complacency set in. I ceased to care. Freed from self-consciousness, I learned to manipulate my color: how I appeared, how I was perceived. I became not just a subject, but a performer.

Rejecting the concept was perhaps the most interesting. If I reject that anyone is observing me, my color and actions are moot. If no one is watching, then my color is irrelevant. My behavior, unmeasured. My actions, unrecorded.



I went back to observing. Beside Aisha, Hassan leaned closer.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

She didn't answer. Her gaze was elsewhere, part of her not yet returned.

The warden answered for her instead:

"No one asked for your concern."

The blow came fast. A sickening crack as knuckle struck bone. Hassan crumpled. Aisha flinched.

The room held its breath.

Hassan groaned, alive, but bent in pain. The warden flexed his fingers, savoring the moment.

The razor hummed as it passed over Aisha's scalp.

Her history, her voice, taken in quiet clumps.

One by one, others followed.

Grace stepped forward, her fingers brushing the silver cross at her neck.

"Lord, I am not scared," she whispered. "Allow me one small joy..."

She kissed her Bible, then surrendered it, standing still as everything else was stripped away.

Harjit stood next, his fingers instinctively reaching for something to cover his head.

His faith was in his stance. His words, though unspoken, I heard from his spirit.

"See me. Take what you will. You cannot take what I am."

David stood frozen, trembling at the sound of the razor.

Memories of stories he'd heard from Auschwitz rose in his mind: stripes, shaved heads, bodies like fallen wheat.

Stories he had tried to believe belonged to the past.

But they did not.

A tear slipped down his cheek, not from fear, but from recognition.

Though not a man of prayer, he imagined himself one as his voice trembled:

"Adonai...

They clearly hate me.

But You never asked me to pay for the soul You placed in me.

So I return it to Your refiner's fire.

Help me be a tzaddik.

Let me walk in Your shadow, always."

I heard every word.

It is not language that makes prayer holy.

It is longing.

It is return.

I blew upon him. This newly adjusted David was returning.

Grace gently wiped the tear from his cheek.

"I pray for a miracle," she said.

Not rescue.

Justice.

A miracle had been granted.

The guards opened the stairwell door.

Bear.

Fox.

Wolf.

Names worn like skin. Tools shaped into men.

They descended, barefoot, breath held tight, into the bowels of the prison.

Urine-slick stone.

Rot.

Sweat.

Despair.

The cell, built for one, now held six. Yet each corner bore more than just the weight of their bodies. The spirits of those who had been here before scratched relentlessly at the walls, desperate for release, desperate for freedom. Though their physical bodies had space to move, their flesh screamed with suffocation, and their souls were pressed together, compressed within these cold, unforgiving confines.

Then came the last stripping: not of cloth, but of symbol.

Five lockboxes.

Not six.

Aisha noticed.

Everyone noticed. Each lockbox held a gold coin, meant to pay for the bearer's execution.

Bear removed each prisoner's coin with ceremony, but when it came to Aisha, he handed her a paper bag with strange care.

She had arrived dressed in a party gown, intending to dine with the warden, only to find herself cast back into the role of prisoner.

Bear gave her the bag. Inside was a tattered white dress. And beneath the dress, the notebook. She did not reach for it immediately. She pressed her hand against it through the fabric of the bag, confirming it was there, and then lifted the dress out as though that were the only thing she had been given. The warden did not notice. He had not known what he was holding when he took it. He did not know what he was returning now. The fabric was plain, a stark contrast to the gown she had worn just hours ago.

Bear sneered at her, not with desire, not with menace, but with the particular contempt of a man doing work he has not been paid for. He gestured at the dress. "Put it on. Apparently you were worth more to him alive than dead. Lucky for you. Not so lucky for the executioner."

He and the warden watched intently as Aisha undressed, giving no chance to cover herself. Embarrassed, she feigned dignity as she removed her clothing, doing her best to preserve what little sense of control she had left.

Resentment softened into weary understanding. Fear flickered again as the guard handed five gold coins to the warden, who placed them into a box at his belt.

The warden tapped the box: click, click.

"Sleep while you can," he said. "The bright lights burn."

And with that, he left, his laughter echoing long after his footsteps had faded.

Ahmad shifted uncomfortably.

"Bright lights," he murmured. "Maybe it's a way out."

Hassan tried humor, but it fell flat.

"Maybe it makes this place less of a nightmare."

"We're like pickles in a jar," Ahmad grumbled.

Aisha smirked.

"And I'm the spice?"

Even a joke could be rebellion. Hassan felt a wave of relief, however slight, and welcomed the momentary respite.

"Aisha," Ahmad said softly. "Get some rest."

From his corner, Harjit growled,

"Some of us are trying to find peace."

He adjusted the strip of cloth shaped into a turban, dignity in fragments.

Hassan noticed Aisha shivering.

He draped his blanket over her.

"Hey, Spicy," he whispered. "Take this."

"What about you?" she asked.

He said nothing.

She opened the blanket and motioned.

After a moment, he joined her.

"Can you keep a secret?" Aisha whispered.

"Sure," Hassan murmured.

She grinned, eyes glinting.

"Shh."

She pulled a tiny flask from her gown.

"Soup," she said. "I made it."

A miracle disguised as contraband.

David sat up, shivering. Something in her laugh broke him open.

"If Moses was here..."

He prayed again, Hebrew rising in cracked syllables.

Grace pressed her hand to her cross.

"Lord... even the ones who harm us."

The cell quieted.

One light flickered.

Six bodies settled into borrowed warmth.

But something lingered:

A turning.

Not outward.

Not upward.

Inward.

They were not free.

Not yet.

But something holy entered the room.

Not loud.

Not radiant.

But true.

And it did not leave.

The spirit remained.

Not above them.

In them.

It did not ascend.

It stayed.

Mirepoix

My existence began shortly after the onset of Jehovah's creation period, recorded fastidiously for the Council by Ganesha and Saraswati, the scribes of Brahma. Other angels surrounding the throne and protecting Jehovah were formed in the pre-chrono aeon, beings beyond the reach of time. Later, Celestials were crafted out of spiritual milieu as messengers, as special servants, and as warriors. But we are more than function: every thread of our essence is woven with intent. We are instruments of Jehovah's will, living conduits of divine purpose.

Not all spirits share this design, as recent events before the Council of Ancients revealed. It gives us an uneasy relationship with Essence, a force drifting just askew of Jehovah's deliberate curiosity.

Essence is the formless motive behind will: raw spirit, untempered by purpose. Beautiful, yes, like a gull rising into the sunrise. But chaotic, too, like the waves that shatter piers, tearing at the edges of order.

We were formed before time. And now, we touch this marvelous invention: this temporality, His signature upon all his projects, His universes.

From where I stand, time stretches like brittle parchment, dry, unyielding, refusing to tear. Refusing to pass.



Hassan first heard whispers scratching in the walls: faint voices, crackly and indistinct. They were caught in time's echo, speaking of his death like inventory. His state warranted closer inquiry. I consulted his guardian who explained: *Hassan doesn't understand this life is only a phase.*

Since then, the young man drifts, dozing in patches, heart racing. He doesn't sleep. He fades. Then returns.

The cell holds the pale gray of fluorescence, light without warmth. Like memory gone sour.

Time doesn't move here. It coagulates. Thick and unmoving, like old blood in a bowl.

His breath catches every few minutes, a kind of quiet panic that feels like drowning without water.

There's no struggle left in him, not because he accepts what's coming, but because his body has forgotten how to respond to fear. Like a deer in headlights. No way forward. No way back. Options seem to be vapor.

Fear has settled now: thick, invisible, inescapable. Humidity before a storm.

He tries to recall what you're supposed to remember when the darkness closes in: a mother's presence, the heat of childhood summers, anything pure.

But the memories never take shape. They melt before they land.

His mind is a field of static now, an emotional tinnitus that hums where feeling used to live.

Even rage has grown tired.

He whispers once to the ceiling, not to Allah. That door closed long ago.

"I didn't do anything."

It's not a protest. Not a plea. Just the one truth he can carry into the dark.

He thinks: *Let it be over. Or let it be known. Just let something outlive this silence.*

No one will remember him. No ceremony. No name carved in stone. Just a vanishing, neat and complete.

Hassan lies awake, counting footsteps beyond the iron bars, each one a hollow liturgy. A prayer with no god left to answer.

He always startles at the wrong moment, flinching not from pain, but from some final verdict that never comes. I've watched it. Many times.

Then the air shifts.

Not a draft. Not chill. Something more ancient. A breath with memory: sharp as old incense, heavy as forgotten oaths.

It slips through the stone: threading between ribs, curling beneath skin, whispering in the language of prisons that predate history. Prisons built not with walls, but with silence.

The sound that arrives isn't quite a wail. It's deeper, more hunger than sorrow, more verdict than voice.

It rises not from lungs, but from the marrow of the prison itself.
Stone exhaling memory.

Ahmad jerks upright, breath slicing the air. "Did you hear that?"

Grace clutches her cross, not in fear, but like one cradling a radio, hoping for a transmission from heaven.

"Spirits," she breathes, the word fine as silk, brittle as frost.

David swallows.

"Ghosts?"

Harjit doesn't blink. "Not all ghosts mean harm."

Aisha is startled by the ease of his claim. She nearly says it aloud, but instead, she thinks: *Some spirits follow. Some only remember. Some are waiting for something worse than death.*

She halts the noise in her mind, cuts it off like a light. Stillness becomes her armor. Each breath, slow. Exact. Measured like a sniper's last inhale. A soldier playing dead, with teeth.

"Do you think they're waiting?"

Her eyes track the dark, not startled, but assessing. Weighing shape and silence. Already calculating what comes next.

"That wasn't the wind," she says. *No. It was something else entirely. A shuffle: measured, intentional. Not wholly in this world. Not entirely out of it.*

Then the laughter.

Not a sound. Not even a voice.

A ripple at the seam of thought.

Like breath fogging the other side of a mirror.

Or a dream that crouches, waiting for your return.

The prison is getting inside them. Or worse, they are beginning to fit inside it.

Their guardian angels intercede, whispering calm into souls steeped in grief thick as tar.

Only Grace and David remain still.

Grace is praying. I see a swarm of spirits of faith and hope interceding with spirits of fear and anxiety. They surround Grace as her lips move fervently. Her eyes are strained shut. There is no perspiration or tears but her requests originate in her soul and they are heartfelt.

I know her prayers will be heard.

Aisha watched Grace from across the cell: eyes closed, hands still, lips moving without sound. She had seen people pray before, but this was different. Not desperate. Not bargaining. Grace was not clinging to anything. She was releasing something. Aisha had no word for what she was seeing, so she placed it where she kept all the things she did not yet understand.

Harjit taps his knee, a metronome against the tightening air.

"Maybe rats," he offers too casually.

David's head tilts.

"Rats don't laugh," he murmurs.

The silence holds, not empty, but listening.

And something else listens with it.

Then it comes again.

Laughter.

Not sound.

Not voice.

A vibration at the edge of perception.

Like memory remembering itself.

Reality buckles, the seam of it stretching like wet parchment.

The veil doesn't just fray: it thins, sighs, begins to weep.

And something ancient, without breath, without form, leans close.

Not to cross.

To witness.

Fear makes the invitation.

Not to escape.

To be entered.



The cold deepens, past flesh, past bone, into the root of memory. Aisha shivers. She longs for sleep, but here, dreams do not soothe; they claw, they convulse. They are battlegrounds. She senses eyes upon her yet cannot bring shape to the feeling, cannot name it.

She fears only what she cannot name. The fact that she is unwilling to visualize what surrounds her unseen is her weakness. But Essence knows that her story is not finished.

Aisha shifts closer to Hassan, not by choice, but by instinct older than war. Even in sleep, he's fighting something. There is a mark upon him.

He is in danger. Not just from this place. But from something turning beneath it.

Aisha tells herself it doesn't matter. That none of them matter. That attachment is weakness, sweetness that curdles under torture. But the lie doesn't hold. Not with Hassan.

And if I'm honest, even we who do not bleed have our moments. We watch. We ache. We learn what truly matters. Not just her. Him. All of them. Us. This isn't a haunting. This is a thinning.

Even now, spirits circle overhead like vultures. Memory breathes. And the walls?

They are learning their names.



The memory returns without invitation. No polite knock. No warning dream. Just a blade through quiet thought. That's how the truest ones arrive, quiet not because they are weak, but because they are unresolved.

It was the night of the roundup. At one point in time, a time already too late to stop what was coming, a quiet emanation signaled the beginning. So subtle, I nearly missed it. But Lakita caught it immediately.

The crowd moved like a single animal, frightened, frozen. Mud sucked at their feet. Steam lifted from skin like smoke off damp kindling. Confusion held panic hostage for one more breath, just long enough to delay what should have been impossible.

Then, the gunfire.

Sharp. Final. A sound that doesn't ask for interpretation. It doesn't echo, it erases. It rewrites the air and everything breathing in it.

And Hassan moved forward.

Not to hide. Not to run. Not even toward Aisha, whose scream might've summoned a thousand hands, if even one soul had

courage. He moved without calculation, without command, only conviction. Into the open. Into the line of fire.

He moved toward the one who couldn't move fast enough.

David's mother.

A woman he did not know. The same woman whose name David now folds into the Kaddish, like a breathless goodbye whispered to a dying relative.

He doesn't know she didn't die alone. He doesn't know or remember that someone stood between her and the bullet. That someone lived. That someone wept for her as if she were his own.

But Aisha remembers. And so do I.

She saw the choice, the shield, the impossible survival no one speaks of. She has carried the truth in silence because some truths are too sacred for history.

Hassan saw her falter, not collapse, just a stumble. A half-step in slick mud. But it was enough. The Black Brigade raised their rifles. Hassan stepped into the line of fire.

In that instant, he moved, not out of loyalty or duty, but because standing still felt like betrayal.

The weapons were fired with full intent to kill an innocent, harmless old woman.

All could hear his voice boom like thunder. He didn't whisper. He shouted at the men with guns. Not with panic. Not with hope. But with that rare, doomed thing humans call conviction. Integrity.

As if sound alone could stop death. As if morality might interrupt machinery. As if the soul's cry could outrun a bullet.

The shot rang out. And yet he did not fall.

This is the pivotal moment. The kind that tests the grit of any creature. The moment that reveals something more than instinct, more than survival.

I have seen gods retreat, spirits scatter. Even Celestials flee, driven by nothing but the imperative of self-preservation.

But not this man.

His mettle has been tested. And his soul has been found worthy.

Aisha saw him lower to the ground, not from injury, but from the weight of her body in his arms. It wasn't blood that brought him down. It was surrender. Not to violence, but to loss. To the brutal arithmetic of sacrifice in a world already tipped toward cruelty.

He didn't run. He stayed. Not out of pride, not even out of principle, but because leaving would have made the selfless act incomplete.

And no one credits him, even the old woman.

The bullet passed but not through him. His body had braced for the end, fully expecting it. And yet, it never came.

David, in his quiet faith, believes his mother died alone. He bows his head each night, lips whispering Kaddish like a spell, not to summon her back, but to hold the silence together. He succumbs to the will of the Creator believing that every one of his responses is in recognition of the Creator's purpose.

An actionable hope that prayer binds the ache into something resembling meaning.

He clutches her memory like a worn photograph, its edges frayed by time and grief.

David doesn't know someone stood between her and death. That her final breath was cradled in the arms of a stranger, a man he'd been taught to fear, by his mother no less.

He always hears stories of those who hate his kind.

The bullet found her, swift, unyielding, as if the world had already chosen her to fall.

It passed by Hassan, though he stood between. No one saw how. No one could explain why. But the result was absolute: she died, and he did not.

Aisha knows, and so do I. The man who held her had meant to take the bullet in her place. When it took her instead, he stayed and smiled, so that the last face she saw would hold no fear. He closed her eyes gently, his tears falling not only for her but for the cruel mercy of the moment. I heard him say, *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*. As nearly as words allow: Indeed, we belong to Allah, and indeed, to Him we shall return."

While the story David tells is honest, it is incomplete. He honors her memory, unaware her last moment wasn't isolation, but interruption. A shield. A human shield. A man most would not remember. A name nearly erased from every record but this one.

The bullet missed him. But his heart had already chosen sacrifice. Not for love. Not for duty. For decency.

And now, here in this cage of stone and cold, Aisha remembers.

And maybe that's why, despite everything, she cannot let Hassan slip away.

She pulls him close in the dark. Not with desire. Not with romance. But with insistence. With memory.

Her arms curve around him like roots refusing to let a tree fall. She is not offering warmth, she is demanding presence. Demanding that his soul stay tethered to something that still breathes.

But it's already happening. The thinning. It's begun.

No light. No angel. No divine proclamation. Just the knowing that eerie, perfect human sense when a soul begins to drift and the body hasn't caught on.

He is leaving. Not this moment. Not yet. But soon.

She presses her fingers into the thin fabric of his shirt as if trying to stitch him to the now. Her heartbeat thuds like a fist on a locked door.

A tear escapes, unbidden, slow, tracking the curve of her cheek.

Deep in the belly of this place, laughter. Not a voice. Not even a sound. Just a shift in the air. A pressure behind the silence. A suggestion that something old is watching. Patient. Pleased. Familiar with this shape of heartbreak.

I have seen this before. Not the dying, death is as common as breath. But the staying. The refusal to let someone die alone.

It is a kind of grace the body remembers, even when the mind forgets.

Aisha may not call it prayer. But I know it as one. And I am still listening.

Being Bella

The nightwinds carry sweetened air. Floral. Deceptive. The kind that exists to make you forget what it covers. Our gentleman warden has his own version: terror dressed as cologne, charm as a second skin. His destination lies beyond the stone cells beneath the church, in another kind of cell entirely. Here, pain wears silk. The bars are not iron but flesh. Control has been perfected into something that passes for intimacy. Only the texture of suffering changes.

Fear shares the space here, veiled, perfumed. Whispers slip between lips that know too much. Just beyond St. Nicholas' cemetery, down the hill from Rosocova's cleanest shops, sits the Little Admiral's Tavern. It overlooks the town. The local police know of it. So does the mayor. In the finest private chamber, Alexei emerges from the shower. Steam rises. The mirror clouds. The windows blur. The fire crackles, warm and insistent. He has been here before. Others have too.

Alexei wipes the mirror clean, revealing skin still flushed with heat and a face rehearsed to charm and conceal. Wine curls in

his glass like a half-uttered spell. Classical music drifts through the chamber, a lullaby for appetites dressed as civility.

He closes the doors. The night prepares its script. And I prepare to watch.

Mortals fortify themselves before a performance: wine, sweets, the little armor of a pressed suit or a new dress, a dainty lingerie that leaves nothing to the imagination. They sense, perhaps without knowing it, that watching someone else's vulnerability requires its own kind of preparation. I require nothing. I have watched scenes like this across centuries, and what I feel most keenly is not dread or pity but gratitude, gratitude that I am the one holding the ledger and not the one being written into it. That relief, if I'm honest, is the only comfort I allow myself anymore. I settle in. The night has prepared its script. And I am thankful, deeply, quietly thankful, that my only role is to record what happens next.

He strolls to the vintage leather chair: worn, regal, softened by decades of indulgence. Moonlight spills across the tranquil pond below, where ducks glide effortlessly, sending ripples over silvered water. Alexei settles into the cool, firm leather, leaning back with ease.

Swirling his wine, his mind drifts, not merely to the Cohiba Behike en route, but to the delivery girl, and the pleasures the evening promises. He savors a slow, deliberate sip, warmth spreading through his chest.

A knock, gentle, expectant, breaks the hush.

Alexei rises. Opens the door.

And there she stands.

Bella, on the trembling cusp of something not quite fate: a name awaits her inside. Not hers. But tonight she must carry it like silk stretched thin over skin.

She does not want this. Not exactly. But she isn't running either.

She leans, toward choice, toward risk, toward a kind of becoming that has no script.

In this world, will, even fragile, even frightened, is holy.

Make no mistake: she is not powerful. Not practiced. Not yet.

But she is listening. She is learning.

The fire glows behind Alexei. Bella steps toward the warmth, not because she is cold, but because she knows that the fire will burn with or without her and that direction holds promise.

She walks deliberately. Beautifully. Without apology.

I am an observer, bound by oath to the Council. Bound to watch, not interfere. I record what the world tries to forget, so Jehovah may amend His entries in the Book of Life.

He does not erase. That is not His way.

But the Council must tell Him where the lines need adjustment.

Bella is not here to seduce. She is here to survive.

And at her Guardian's request, I watch with an open mind.

This is not about pleasure. Or not only.

It is about performance. Expectation. The cost of being seen and the trick of living for another day.

And Bella, soft as she is, is trying to learn.

Carpe diem.

She must learn what her audience expects, and how to make them long for it, even grovel.

Tonight, she practices.

She is not alone. Even now, another watches, appointed not by chance but by Essence itself. She is one of mine, though her charge is Bella. Quiet. Steadfast. Present.

I rarely speak the names of guardians I supervise.

But now it matters.

Edna.

Like all of us, carbon or Celestial, she serves the will of Essence in the turning cosmos. Not to judge, but to witness what Bella does with the name she's been given. And to offer counsel when she can.

Edna watches Bella. I watch Edna watching Bella.

Bella remains oblivious, blessedly so. She is far too busy being Bella.



Then, a knock.

Measured. Deliberate.

It slices cleanly through the hush.

Alexei rises and opens the door. She stands framed in the amber light of the hall, a robe clinging gracefully to her frame, gold earrings catching the fireglow. Jet-black hair, unbound, spills over her shoulder like a velvet curtain.

For a moment, just one, he is elsewhere.

Young again. A bull in his prime. His face unlined, his knuckles unbroken, his body unscarred. The man he once was rises through the man he has become. The firelight reshapes her, not

Bella. Memory. The lashes. The eyes. That impossible blend of vulnerability sharpened by defiance.

Heat coils within him. Something old. Unfinished. He places a hand on her shoulder. Leans in. Lips graze her cheek.

"Good evening, Aisha."

Bella flinches, slightly. Not from fear. From recognition. He does not see her. He sees something else. Someone else.

And still, she smiles. A gentle smile, carefully measured. A pause. Then:

"My name is Bella."

Alexei studies her, eyes narrowing, mouth softening, but he still does not see her. Not really. He never does.

"Aisha," he repeats, softer this time, a whisper shaped like a wound.

Bella breathes. Keeps the tremor in her chest where it belongs.

"Sir," she answers calmly, "you know my name."

Alexei strokes his chin, a smirk curling at its edge.

"I heard."

Today is a stage, and Alexei intends to direct the scene. The past may be etched in ash, but tonight he believes it can be rewritten.

Bella stands at the edge of his myth: survivor, symbol, siren. He does not realize she is none of these things. Or worse: she is all of them, but not by choice.

Her eyes shimmer in the firelight. Wide. Measured. Fear tucked neatly behind the shine.

"You look stunning, Bella," he says, lingering on the name like it's borrowed. He nods toward the small table, two glasses waiting, already breathing.

"Do you like working for Anechka?"

His tone is casual, but Bella hears the audition behind it.

"She treats me well," she replies, lifting the glass with steady fingers.

Alexei begins his monologue, part seduction, part scripture. Tales of power. Business. Women. Lies wrapped in velvet. Achievements lacquered in wine.

Bella listens, nodding at the right moments. She glances at the closed door. Locked.

Her mind drifts, past the furniture, past the fire, to the quiet place where her true name waits.

He notices the drift. The slight delay in her gaze. And pivots.

"Are you nervous?" he asks, his robe shifting as he leans back, revealing the edge of intent.

"A little," she says truthfully. "I've never done this before."

A flicker, surprise, curiosity. Then she smiles, adjusting:

"Not like this."

He happily remembers her red name tag on her waitress uniform. He had spent the day in anticipation of this moment. He softens, reassured.

"Good. No one is forcing you?"

"No," she says, without flinching. "I want this. I need the money."

He nods, pleased.

"My cigar."

She moves smoothly, offering the box like a ritual object. He takes it, lights it, watches her through the glow.

"Smart girl. You've got the right temperament. Anechka will guide you."

He exhales a trail of smoke, approval curling at its edges.

"Tonight," he adds, "I'm just another client."

Bella nods. Not shy. Not eager. Poised.

"I'm here to please you," she says, not to him, but to the space between them. A pretense. A spell. A mantra.

"It's just a role," she adds softly. Somehow that makes it truer.

"The robe," Alexei gestures.

Bella's fingers hesitate, only for a skipped heartbeat, before she loosens the knot.

The robe slips from her shoulders, smooth and deliberate.

She lets him watch. She feels his gaze.

To be desired is power.

Let him want.

Her body is not submission. It is strategy.

What Alexei sees is skin.

What Bella performs is presence.

But I see what stirs beneath the surface: a name unmoored from flesh, a soul deciding where to land. And beneath it all, the faintest trace of Chaos, Essence's counterpart, flickering like static across the cord of fate. I log it for my report.

He sees Aisha.

But Bella remains.

She steps forward, not as the woman he names, but as the girl who knows what a name means to a man like him. She moves with confidence born not of belief, but of calculation.

Bella is poor, vulnerable, forgotten.

But tonight, that story is dressed in red silk and mistaken for something else.

Let him name.

Let him imagine.

Let him ache.

She knows exactly who she is.

Alexei exhales slowly, watching her.

"That's better," he murmurs. "Now you understand."

She does not correct him. She doesn't need to.

She breathes deeply, stepping closer, letting him see what he wants, and nothing more. Cool air brushes her exposed skin, sharpening her senses. Her nipples stiffen, not with shame or fear, but with the physical truth of the moment. Real. Present.

"Turn around," he commands softly, voice warm and coaxing.

She obeys, not from obedience, but from discipline. From control. She arches slightly, offering not submission but precision.

His gaze and his hands travel slowly, savoring every inch. She feels it, the unmistakable weight of his wanting.

And for the first time, she understands: this body, her body, is not a mask.

It's a boundary.

He may call her Aisha.

But only Bella decides what he gets to touch.

And tonight, he doesn't even know who he's reaching for.



Alexei lifts the hem of Bella's satin slip, his gaze drifting downward, absorbing every detail.

His low, husky growl says everything. What rises inside her is not a form of surrender; it is calculation sharpened by heat. She feels his wanting and studies it, the way a survivor studies a choppy sea

before daring to dive in. A part of her sees the warning signs and yet gives in anyway.

"Come here," Alexei whispers, his warm breath skimming her skin, making her heart quicken just a little. The closeness sends another jolt of excitement through her, nurturing a fragile strand of confidence. His warmth surrounds her, his gaze heavy, blazing with a desire that sears straight through her composure.

Bella leans into the old man, drawn by his desire and propelled by the rising passion within her.

She feels his hands pull her in slightly from the back of her slender thighs. He kisses gently down her waist, slower than she expects, his mouth trailing toward her inner thigh.

She glances down at the top of his head, wondering if she's doing any of this right. Her experience is limited; she thinks more than she feels, and she knows it. She's relieved he didn't kiss her, that would have been too much, too close.

Then, his tongue teases her, just lightly.

Her thoughts scatter. The moment overtakes her. Yet even as her body reacts, she senses something inside remains still, watching, measuring, learning: the part of her that has never once confused pleasure with safety.

Anticipation rises, neither romantic nor tender, but undeniably real.

A moment of clarity strikes her, this isn't just about power, it's about control. She has him exactly where she wants him.

She closes her eyes, just for a moment. She lets herself feel it, but not for too long; she can't risk losing control.

Then Bella feels him looking up at her, his breath warm against her skin. She meets his eyes.

There's a spark, real, but not romantic. I know what she's thinking: closer to chemistry than connection. I can read it on her face the way one reads a map.

When he rises, his mouth finds hers with a practiced certainty.

She lets it happen, not because she's changed her mind, but because in this moment everything feels inconsequential, purely physical. She tells herself that.

The kiss is long, playful, intentional.

She catches the scent of her own arousal mixed with the faint edge of cigar smoke, and it surprises her how much she likes it.

She isn't thinking anymore, not about tactics, not about identity.

Her thoughts shift to sensation alone: color, heat, and soft tones I cannot name.

After what feels like a brief, lovely eternity, she moves closer, drifting in a soft state of forgetfulness. His strong hands settle at the small of her back. Her lips brush softly against his ear. "I'm ready," she whispers. For a moment, she forgets why she is with this man at all. With quiet confidence, her hand finds the back of his head. She guides him downward, over the expanding rise of her chest, drawing him into her warmth, not submissive, but sure.

The scent of her arousal lingers between them, thick enough to taste. Alexei inhales it with a long, deliberate breath, his grip tightening as he pulls her closer, not enough, never enough. His breathing deepens, warm and ragged against her skin. She feels his mouth return to her body, and her own breath catches, following where his lips lead.

He holds her tightly, possessive, almost desperate as though closing the gap between them might somehow make him whole.

She repositions herself, straddling her right leg over his shoulder. Alexei smiles, clearly pleased by her movements. His hands settle on her hips, guiding her with a gentle but insistent grip. "Lower," he urges, his breath warm against her skin.

Bella's eyes drop to the robe, her mind racing with anticipation edged by trepidation. She hesitates, her inexperience leaving her unsure of how to proceed.

Alexei senses her uncertainty and, with a gentle smile, starts to loosen his robe. As the fabric falls open, revealing him beneath, Bella's gaze is pulled toward him; her expression blends fascination with apprehension.

As the final layer of mystique falls away, she studies him, unflinching, but not without thought.

He's aroused. Contained. Real.

She studies him the way an engineer studies a cathedral, less for worship than for structure. Something once imagined, now standing before her: solid, undeniable. I've seen this before: the moment when fantasy becomes fact. It's remarkable how quickly the mind adjusts, how quickly fear transforms into something else.

The head is smooth and taut, already slick with arousal. His shaft curves slightly, veins rising beneath the surface like delicate wiring.

She observes everything: the density of him, the symmetry, the way he twitches subtly, unconsciously. She's fascinated, not by lust alone, but by the fact of him. The anatomy. The architecture. A living structure once confined to diagrams and whispers, now real, near, offered.

I do not often describe the body in such terms, but her gaze demands it. Tonight, it becomes its own quiet theology, and I must follow where it leads.

Bella compares without intending to the few partners she's known, the whispered descriptions from her Persian friend, even the soft-focus porn they once laughed at together. This isn't idealized or exaggerated. It's present. Alive. Dangerous because she is...because she enjoys sex. For a fleeting moment, she justifies it to herself: this is work, perhaps the only skill she has and she could get used to it.

Bella inhales, steadying herself. There is no blueprint for this, no precise measure, no reliable schematic to follow. She pauses, catches herself, then glances around the room and gives a small shake of her head. This isn't a job, she tells herself.

Her fingers close around him, gently at first, testing the weight, the texture. He's warm, pulsing. She watches his breath stutter slightly. That, more than anything, emboldens her.

She moves slowly, purposefully. Not coy. Not sultry. Curious. Determined. There's control in that, her way of turning confusion into method.

His body responds. He thickens slightly in her grip. His hips shift closer. And for the first time, she feels it, not just analysis, but impact.

She's affecting him. She has his full attention. And I feel her knowledge of it bloom inside her, powerful and unexpected. For a moment, she disappears. In her place, something older. Aisha. Or the memory of what he thinks Aisha was. The transformation is instantaneous. I watch it happen and I am, if I'm honest, pleased with myself for seeing it.



A light rap at the door. Bella's eyes widen as the door slowly opens. Alexei, an elderly statesman of leisure, sees what he wants: large, adoring emerald eyes submitting to him. He smiles, reassuring.

The moment fractures, but it does not vanish. The atmosphere still hums, desire suspended, not extinguished.

Bella's hand moves toward her robe, quick but measured. She ties it, just tight enough to shield herself, but not to hide. A flutter catches in her chest. Should she have waited for Anechka? The question stabs her like ice. Was she supposed to wait?

A flash of doubt sweeps over her, cold and sharp, too late to resolve. Her thoughts scatter as she wonders if she went too far, out of line, exposed. A nerve hums beneath her skin, tightening the knot in her stomach.

Alexei grins. "My love."

"One of many," Anechka's voice slices through the tension, teasing, slow, and deliberate. She steps into the room, her eyebrows rising as she takes note of Alexei's obvious bulge beneath his robe. Anechka's attention shifts to Bella, measuring her with that quiet confidence, a reminder of her dominance.

Anechka walks to the velvet Louis XV knockoff chaise and tosses her gloves and overcoat, revealing the soft tone of her skin beneath a red satin teddy that catches the light, framing her form with elegance and power.

Bella straightens slightly, unsure if the moment calls for apology, or simply more waiting. Her pulse stirs with the uncertainty of not knowing what Anechka expects, but Anechka doesn't need to say anything. Bella already knows that this moment is not for her to dictate. Everything from here on out is for her to learn.

She steps into the space as though she owns the air itself. Her gaze sweeps deliberately: half-filled glasses, a discarded robe, the warm edge of intimacy still hanging in the air like mist and lands, finally, on Bella.

"Starting without me?" she asks. Her voice is soft, measured. But there is no surprise in it, only assessment.

Bella straightens, a gesture of grace rather than defense. There is dignity in her movement. "Only preparing," she replies.

Anechka's smile deepens, not warmth exactly, but the particular pleasure of a woman who has arranged the room, the evening, and the players, and is now watching it unfold exactly as she intended.

"You've been busy," she murmurs, now behind Bella. "That's good."

Her fingers brush Bella's shoulder. The touch is not affectionate. It's evaluative.

"The clients want confidence," Anechka says. "But never arrogance. You understand?"

"Yes," Bella answers, softly. But firmly.

Anechka glances toward Alexei. "And you? Is she what you imagined?"

His voice is quiet, reverent. "Better."

Anechka's smile deepens. She lowers herself to her knees beside Bella. Bella tenses, not from confusion, but from the sudden

closeness of someone who, until this moment, existed above her. Anechka pats her back, a small, steady pressure between the shoulder blades. It's alright. The gesture is almost maternal.

With a glance up at Alexei and a wry grin, Anechka joins her, lips moving slowly, tongue working with a deliberate rotation that is less passion than pedagogy. Bella watches from inches away, close enough to study the method.

After a few minutes, Anechka draws back, guiding Bella forward. Slowly, they begin the duet, moving in synchronicity. Not quite by accident but by design, their lips meet at the crown. Bella takes him deeper, her mouth closing around him until her lips press firmly against Anechka's, mouth to mouth over him, an intimacy she hadn't prepared for. Something flickers across her face, there and gone. Anechka catches it. Neither of them acknowledges it.

Anechka pulls away, a thread of saliva catching the firelight. She doesn't wipe it.

Bella continues alone, trying to mirror Anechka's rhythm: slow, deliberate, unhurried. Then she feels Alexei's hand settle on the back of her head, hears the low groan she's been waiting for without knowing it. A small relief floods through her. *I feel her emotion and the validation it gives her. She believes she has pleased her examiners. The thought is small, but I catch it, the way relief can feel like success when you've been taught that survival depends on pleasing others.*

Anechka rises, gives Alexei a long kiss, letting him taste what's just been done to him before crossing to the sofa, settling with the kind of grace that suggests years of wielding power from a reclined position. She does not lounge, she reigns.

"Pour me a glass," she says to Alexei, and then, to Bella, "Continue. I'm watching."

I watch, but I do not intrude. There are rites older than my wings, and even we do not interrupt them.

Edna twitches slightly. Our spirits do not speak, not overtly, but I feel her awareness sharpen. She observes Bella as I observe her, and still further, I feel the currents ripple outward.

Something has begun, more than seduction. A transformation. A test. A rite.

Anechka refills her glass. The fire settles. And Alexei, watching Bella from across the room with an expression Bella cannot yet read, reaches into the inside pocket of his robe and withdraws something small. A photograph. He does not show it to anyone. He looks at it for a moment, just long enough, then tucks it away.

Bella does not see his face in that moment. But I do.

He has been waiting since the night he made waiting permanent. I do not think he knows this. The most costly mistakes rarely announce themselves as such.

He glances at Bella, at the line of her jaw, the particular way she holds her shoulders and something shifts in his expression. Not desire. Recognition. Or the ghost of it. The way a man looks at a copy when what he wants is the original.

"Aisha," he says, quietly. Not to anyone. Not quite.

Anechka hears it. Her eyes move to him, just briefly, just long enough and what she sees there is not a man lost in the room with her. It is a man standing in a different room entirely, reaching for someone neither of them is.

She says nothing. She raises her glass instead.

Bella hears the name too. *She files it in the place she keeps things she does not yet have language for: the same place she filed the locked door, the photograph, the particular quality of his wanting that never quite landed on her. She does not know yet what the name means. But she knows she is not it. She knows she has never been it. And she tells herself this is fortunate, though some part of her, the part that still holds hope, is not entirely certain she believes it.*

And far across the city, as night thins and light begins to push through rusted bars, another kind of deal stirs in the darkness.

It, too, is being watched.

Aisha's Vision

He watched David keep to the wall while Harjit paced the cell.

Hunger was wearing them down. Humiliation clung to them even more closely than the cold. But neither of those things was remaking Harjit.

Hatred was.

Not the kind that bursts and burns out. The kind that settles. The kind that hardens.

Harjit carried it in his shoulders now, in the measured set of his jaw, in the way his anger no longer flashed and disappeared. It stayed. It gave him shape. From a distance, someone might have mistaken that for strength.

David almost did.

He watched Harjit with the uneasy attention of someone who wanted to understand suffering and had only ever inherited it at a distance. He knew the old family stories. Trains. Numbers. Names that had thinned into whispers in his grandparents' mouths. He knew enough to recognize damage when he saw it.

But Harjit's certainty was not a lesson passed down through memory. It was not a scar polished by retelling.

It was fresh. It was inside the room with them.

David broke the silence first.

"What's your family like?"

The question was plain enough, but Harjit stopped pacing and looked at him as if he had reached for the wrong wire.

"You barely speak to me," he said. "And that's what you want to know?"

David did not look away. Concern came naturally to him. So did the instinct to move toward pain, even when he had no idea what to do with it once he got there.

"I'm trying to understand."

Harjit let out a short breath through his nose.

"I've seen you with Grace," he said. "Praying for them. For us. Whatever it is you think you're doing."

David opened his mouth, but Harjit kept going.

"We're Sikhs," he said. "From Punjab. I won't pray with her."

One hand rose to his shoulder, fingers pressing beneath the collarbone before he rolled the tension from his neck. It was not nervousness. It looked practiced, almost ceremonial, as if his body still remembered forms of order his life no longer allowed.

"It's our way," he said more quietly. "Service. Oneness. Guru Nanak taught us that."

David listened. He waited for a moment before responding. Then he looked Harjit directly in his eyes and said, "We believe in one God too," he paused. Then after a moment. "You wear a turban, we wear a kippah. Maybe we're not so..."

"It's called a dastar."

The correction came fast and clean.

Harjit held David's gaze until he nodded.

"My father said our kesh, our uncut hair, kept us in the form God gave us." His voice roughened. "It wasn't decoration. It wasn't custom. It was a vow."

David heard the opening in that sentence and stepped into it too quickly.

"But the guards?"

Harjit's face changed.

"But the guards took that from you," David finished.

For a moment Harjit did not speak at all. His hands opened and closed once at his sides, not quite fists, not quite steady.

"It would have been better if they had killed me," he said.

The cell went still.

"They didn't just cut my hair. They broke my word." His voice thinned, then steadied by force. "Do you understand? It was who I was."

David had grown up thinking he knew the shape of holy things taken by violence. He had thought history might have prepared him for the sight of sacrilege in another man's mouth.

It had not.

This was not memory. It was not inherited grief. It was a wound standing in front of him, still open.

Harjit looked away, ashamed of the wetness in his eyes and furious at it.

"It doesn't compare," he muttered. "Whatever stories you carry. This wasn't only dignity. It was everything."

David felt that truth land without argument. Whatever kinship he had tried to offer a moment before now seemed thin, almost childish. He wanted to say something useful. There was nothing.

Harjit dragged in a breath that shook on the way out.

"I will make them pay."

He did not raise his voice. He did not need to. The words dropped into the room and stayed there.

David said nothing.

In the silence, his thoughts went briefly to Grace: the steadiness of her prayers, the way mercy sat in her without softness, like a spine rather than a veil. Then back to Harjit, whose grief had already begun to turn into something harder.

Some people broke. Some hardened. He was only beginning to understand the difference.

Harjit lay down at last, but the vow remained in the air after him.

I marked it.

Sleep did not come to Harjit so much as exhaustion dragged him under.

He lay rigid on the mat, eyes fixed on the ceiling until the stone above him blurred. Each time he closed his eyes he saw hands in uniform, heard laughter, felt the sick lightness of his head afterward. Not just the loss itself, but the violation of it. The public stripping-away. The way shame had entered him and refused to leave.

His breathing turned ragged. Then slower.

At last he slipped into dream.

A woman stood before him in a pale shimmer that did not quite become light. Aisha had spoken of her before: Lakita. Harjit knew

the name, but knowledge did nothing for his ease. The dream did not soften around her. The air remained thick, charged with grief.

She looked at him as if she could see the rage moving through him like weather.

"Harjit," she said, and her voice was gentle enough to irritate him. "Essence understands your pain."

He wanted to turn from her. Even sleeping, he wanted to refuse comfort that had arrived too late.

"But vengeance alone will not restore what was taken," she said. "You are not being asked to forget. You are being asked not to become only this."

His mouth moved before the dream would let sound out. She seemed to hear him anyway.

"Trust Aisha," Lakita said. "Essence chose her for reasons not yet clear."

The shimmer around her dimmed.

Harjit tried to hold on to anger as the dream loosened, as if it were the only thing that still belonged to him.

When he woke, the ache in him was unchanged.

The warden slept badly. He always did.

Anechka's room was the closest thing to peace he permitted himself. The window overlooked the lake, and moonlight stretched across the water in long, pale bands while ducks moved through the shallows without sound.

Tonight he slept in her bed with his arm around her middle. She had curled toward him out of long practice, one hand resting against his chest, asking for nothing.

In the hour before dawn, the room changed.

Not by much. Only enough for someone awake to distrust his own senses.

Lakita was present. Some presences entered a room. Others simply became impossible not to notice.

She did not touch the warden. She did not command him. She only laid a thought where his sleep was thinnest: steam rising from a pot, the smell of broth, the satisfaction of scraps turned into something useful rather than wasted.

From deep inside sleep, his mouth moved.

"I must," he murmured. "I must."

Anechka stirred and settled closer, half awake. Her lips brushed the back of his shoulder. She did not ask what he had dreamed.

Another presence arrived behind Lakita's stillness, colder for having no shape.

"You were sent to observe," Telel said. His voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. "Not to interfere."

Lakita did not look troubled.

"A thought is not salvation," she said. "They still have hands. They still have choices."

Silence.

That was often Telel's most severe answer.

By morning the warden would call for a guard and, with the mild impatience of a man who believed every impulse his own, order the kitchen scraps taken to the prisoners' cell. Bones, peelings, what could not be used elsewhere. He would think himself practical. Almost generous.

Lakita lingered a moment longer. Then she was simply not there.

When the guards left the scraps, nobody spoke at first.

The offering was pitiful: a half-cleaned hen, bones, wilted carrots, half an onion, bruised greens, and a little water they could ill afford to spare. It was more than they had expected and less than they needed.

Aisha stepped forward and pushed back her sleeves.

"I'll do it."

No one argued.

She worked with the concentration of someone who had learned long ago that hunger punished carelessness. She stripped the last feathers from the bird, broke the joints with the dull knife, and set the bones aside for stock. The vegetables she sorted by instinct rather than hope, trimming away rot, keeping whatever still had structure.

The pot began with bones and water. The room filled first with steam, then with the faint smell of onion and marrow. Aisha added the herbs she had wrapped in cloth and hidden from the kitchen days ago. She did not explain where they came from. No one asked.

Time passed. Fire did what fire could.

The broth darkened. The smell deepened.

David looked up first. "That smells better than it should."

Ahmad, seated near the wall, gave the smallest hint of a smile. "That's because she knows what she's doing."

Hassan leaned toward the pot and inhaled. "No. He's right. It's more than that."

In the dimness beyond the firelight, Lakita watched without touching anything.

Whatever changed in the room came first through Aisha's hands.

Aisha stirred once, then again, frowning slightly.

"It's richer," she said. "But still thin."

She dipped the spoon, tasted, and looked at the pot as if it had failed to confess something important.

"It needs body. Fat, maybe. More scraps if we can get them."

Ahmad's expression flattened. "Bear won't give us more if he thinks we can do something with this."

"God provides," Grace said.

Harjit, still raw from the night before, stared into the broth a long time before lifting his eyes.

"David has something," he said.

Every head turned.

David swore under his breath.

Grace frowned. "What are you talking about?"

He hesitated long enough to make the silence awkward, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black pouch.

"It isn't food," he said.

Aisha held out her hand. After a beat, he gave it to her.

She opened the pouch, glanced inside, and looked up again.

"Cannabis."

Hassan blinked. "You traded for that?"

"A guard traded with me," David said. "New one. Hates the warden, hates being here, probably hates me too. It was a deal, not a favor."

Grace leaned closer, caught the smell, and drew back with a soft exhale of surprise.

David rubbed a hand over his face. "I know how it sounds."

"It sounds desperate," Ahmad said.

"We are desperate," Aisha replied.

She pinched the pouch shut again and weighed it in her hand.

"In water, it won't do much," she said. "Not enough. But with butter. Or milk."

David stared at her. "You want to feed it to them."

"I want them slower than they expect to be," she said.

Harjit's mouth twisted. "And if it fails?"

Aisha met his gaze. "Then we are where we already are."

There was very little to say to that.

Grace looked from the pouch to the pot, thinking.

"I can get what you need," she said.

Aisha raised an eyebrow. "From where?"

"From a man who thinks he's choosing," Grace said.

Even in the dark, David could feel the shift in the room. Not certainty, exactly. But direction.

He let out a strained laugh. "So this is the plan? Soup and providence?"

The corner of Ahmad's mouth moved.

"In Brazil," he said dryly, "there's coffee made from beans a bird has already eaten."

David looked at him. "And some rich fool decided that improved them?"

For the first time in hours, a brief, rough laughter passed through the cell.

It vanished quickly, but it had been real.

Aisha handed the pouch back to David.

"Keep it hidden," she said. "And pray Grace is right."

"I already am," Grace said.

Later, when the others had settled into the nervous quiet that comes before risk, Grace found David sitting apart from the fire.

He was staring at nothing.

She crouched in front of him.

"You look like a man waiting for the verdict," she said.

"Maybe I am."

She studied him for a moment. The room had gone softer around the edges with fatigue, but his face was still tight with it.

"You stayed," she said.

He gave a tired half-shrug. "Where else was I supposed to go?"

"That isn't what I mean."

Grace lifted her hands and rested them lightly on his head. He started, then let himself be still.

Her voice, when she spoke, was low enough that it belonged to the two of them alone.

"I give you the peace of the Lord of Israel."

David closed his eyes.

The blessing did not solve anything. It did not loosen the walls or open the door or undo what had already been done to any of them. But it settled in him anyway, small and warm and unwanted only because he wanted it too much.

When he opened his eyes, she was still there, close enough that he could see the steadiness in her.

"Thank you," she said, "for being here with us."

Before he could answer, she kissed him.

Not long. Not tentative either.

A gift, or a benediction, or a reckless thing offered in a place that made people choose quickly. By the time she drew back, his breath had caught.

Grace smiled, but only with one corner of her mouth.

"Sometimes," she said, "God gives strangely."

David could think of nothing to say that did not sound foolish, so he said nothing at all.

Grace stood and turned back toward the others at once, her tone changing with the clean force of someone stepping into work.

"I need milk, butter, water, and clean cloth. Something we can strain with."

Aisha looked up from the pot. "The cloth I can manage. The rest depends on Bear."

Grace nodded. "Then get me to him."

"You don't have to do this," Aisha said.

Grace's expression remained calm. "Yes, I do."

Aisha held her eyes for a second longer than was comfortable. She had spent enough of her life around power to know the difference between naivete and decision. She had mistaken Grace for the first.

Not anymore.

"I can get the hatch open," Aisha said. "Maybe the door, if he's in the mood to be stupid."

Grace's smile sharpened. "Men often are."

That earned a short breath of amusement from Aisha, nothing more.

"I've got soap," she said. "And a little makeup."

"You've been holding out on us?"

"I've been surviving," Aisha said.

Grace inclined her head, accepting the distinction. "Then help me."

Aisha crossed to her bag and pulled out what she had. A scarf. Soap worn thin at the edges. A small tin. Things too modest to look like weapons, which meant they might actually matter.

As Grace gathered them, David watched her with a new kind of attention. Not because she had kissed him. Because she had changed the temperature of the room without ever seeming to push.

Aisha saw that too.

Faith, she thought, could look an awful lot like leverage in the right hands.

Together, she and Grace walked to the door.

For a few seconds there was nothing. Then the hatch scraped open.

Bear's eyes appeared in the slit, already bored.

"What do you want?"

Aisha began to answer, but Bear's attention shifted past her and settled on Grace.

The silence lengthened.

Something low and private passed between the women. Then Aisha stepped back, exactly as Grace had told her to.

Locks clicked.

The door opened.

Getting What They Need

They walk the corridor outside the cell, shoes whispering over concrete, the air sharp with metal and old fear.

Aisha's eyes flick toward a side passage where shadows gather. Possibility hangs in the silence.

"Don't even think about it," a guard warns through the speaker. "There is one exit, and it's locked. If they spot you, they'll shoot."

Grace lifts an eyebrow, surprise brushing her features. "Trust me, escape isn't even on our minds. Right now, I'm more concerned about your soul."

But beneath the steady tone, something in her spirit quivers, as if past and present brush too close together.

Memories rise in Grace: neon lights blazing over dark streets, crimson lips parted in half-forgotten prayers, a man's hand gripping hers too tightly, the bitter tang of cheap vodka. A friend dying in her arms, skin paling like ash.

She closes her eyes. Her hands clench, not to strike, but to hold herself together.

"Lord God, Jehovah Jireh, protect us. Be my shield. I know I'm not worthy. Too many times, I've made You small in my eyes. I

believed in a lie, that you were unable to help me. Forgive me. Show your might, Lord God. Please, protect Aisha. Let her see the light of Your presence. Help us in our time of need."

The words fall like stones, but the silence that follows feels suffocating. Nothing stirs, only the scrape of boots against concrete and the beat of her own pulse. There is no answer. There never is. But still, she pleads. Still she hopes.

Grace leans against the cold wall, drawing a deep breath as though air alone might become courage. Her voice softens, nearly breaking:

"Father, forgive me. I never thought I'd be here again."

The past brushes against her mind like fingertips on glass: faded lipstick, the scratch of motel sheets, the memory of men's touch that once felt like both prison and freedom. She'd left that life. Chosen something higher, cleaner.

And yet... here she stands. Again.

She knows what she's doing and believes it is for the right reason; God orchestrated everything to come together for His good. That it answers a hunger of her own does not trouble her. But she's watched other women do this as show: dress up a necessity in God's clothing, call the thing they're about to do anyway His will. She always pitied them.

"Your will my Lord... let me do it with dignity. And pleasure."

Her fingers drift over her lips, recalling prayers once sobbed into the darkness. This prayer tastes different, not desperation, but surrender.

A wry smile tugs at her mouth.

"And Lord... forgive me for what I'm about to do. But it's been ten years. I know this is part of your design."

It's a curious thing, the human plea to feel. To taste warmth and trembling, to know flesh not merely as biology but as meaning. There's no envy in the observation, only the recognition that certain experiences belong to one kind of creation, and not another. Just as mortals marvel at wings yet remain earthbound, some mysteries lie forever outside one's own nature.

Yet still, questions arise. Was she crafted to feel this way for a purpose beyond even her own understanding? Perhaps some answers are not given to those who watch.

Grace exhales, shoulders easing just enough to keep standing.

"I'm still a woman. And for tonight... let me feel something human."

Across from her, Aisha steps closer to Bear, her voice a blend of silk and iron. "Remember, Bear. You get us what we need first. Then we do whatever."

Grace watches her, gaze unreadable. Inside, a sharp purpose gleams like a blade, bright and cold.

Bear leans into the doorframe, arms crossed. *He has witnessed this ritual countless times, women offering softness as currency. Yet in each exchange flickers a question larger than flesh: whether even a desperate trade can preserve a sliver of the soul.*

Across from him, Aisha stands composed, her only loyalty to survival. *Even that single-minded purpose was not the intention with which they were created. Humans were fashioned for more than these weary transactions of body and fear. But here they are, cursing one another with memories destined to haunt them long after flesh has cooled.*

Bear shifts, his smirk faltering. His hand grips the doorframe tighter, knuckles whitening. He doesn't fully understand what's happening, but something about Aisha's stillness unsettles him.

"Everything you asked for is in the kitchen," he says, his voice rough.

Their eyes meet. Neither blinks. Neither yields.

She doesn't flirt. She doesn't flatter.

She simply is.

And even he seems to sense that she will leave with everything she came for, and somehow, so will he.

He swallows once. When he finally speaks, his words scrape against the quiet:

"One of you can get the stuff. The other comes with me."

In the darkness beyond, breath stirs the air, a quiet exhale leaving no trace. Lakita remains motionless, neither intervening nor absent, her attention fixed but untouched by the pull of flesh.

Grace turns, a strange boldness blooming inside her, a freedom so rare it hums like quiet rebellion. Few prisoners ever taste such certainty.

"I got this," she says, calm and steady. "Go ahead and get the stuff."

Aisha hesitates, eyes darting between Grace and the shadows. Then she nods, slipping away into the kitchen.

Concern coils around Aisha's spirit. Though they do not think of each other as friends in the human sense, there's a bond between them that reaches deeper than words, a shared purpose, a silent accord forged in places beyond freedom. Grace's prayers have long carried a plea for Aisha's fulfillment, for her to live a life whole

and unbound. And now, Aisha fears that Grace may be the one to pay a price too high. *Such silent fears carry the shape of prayer, and prayers are always heard.*

Grace starts to undress, the fabric of her prison garb peeling away slowly, like shedding a skin she no longer recognizes. Each layer falls to the floor, quiet but heavy, as if the weight of her past is tied to every stitch.

Bear watches, breath caught in his chest, as if something vital inside him refuses to move. He has desired Aisha before, drawn to her fire, her sharp edges, her fierce will to survive. But Grace stands in another light.

There's a stillness about her. A quietness that seems to radiate from beneath her skin. Even unclothed, her presence feels untouched in some hidden place where neither man nor memory has laid claim.

Bear steps forward, pulled by a thread he has never resisted.

When he touches her, Grace closes her eyes. Within her mind rises an image bright as starlight: her god beside her, hand in hand.

Not shame.

Not fear.

Only presence.

A current flows through her, not for Bear, but from a higher place. Love unbounded. Strength that belongs neither to muscle nor desire. A peace that defies reason.

She opens her eyes. Meets his gaze without flinching.

"Mr. Bear," she murmurs, her voice low and certain, "get comfortable."

Her hands slip into her hair, shaking it loose in a gesture almost ceremonial, as though some unseen rite has begun.

"I'm going to rock your world."

The heat drains from Grace's skin, leaving behind a thin chill that prickles across her arms. She lies still, breath slowing, her nerves alive with the residue of what just occurred: sharp, unfamiliar, uninvited.

Flesh stirs like this sometimes, even when the soul stands apart. It's not love, not safety. It's a fleeting blaze of control, a sharp gift in a world where little obeys her will.

Beneath the aftershocks, a thin thread of fear runs through her chest. For the first time in years, she finds herself wanting more, not more of Bear, but more of the fleeting freedom that had burned through her veins. And she is grateful for what's already passed.

In the stillness, she waits for God's movement, for mercy to rise, not just for herself, but for the silent ones still trapped in nets of suffering, whose prayers go unheard.

"Thank you, Lord," she breathes, voice trembling as tears she cannot explain rise to her eyes. She can't tell if they are for release or for the ache that remains.

Aisha steps into the room, her gaze sweeping over Grace, hair tangled, skin flushed, streaks of salt glinting on her cheeks. A faint smirk plays at Aisha's lips, though something more complex glimmers behind her eyes.

"Are you okay, Grace?" A note of concern surfaces, then fades as quickly as it appeared, replaced by recognition of the glow now softening her friend's features.

Grace freezes, chest heaving, and manages a small smile, eyes shut. Aisha's smirk deepens. "Who'd have thunk it," she murmurs to herself, and walks away.

Grace opens her eyes to Aisha's back, already nearly gone. "Come back," she whispers, too soft to carry.

She wipes her eyes and breathes a quiet prayer, careful not to let Aisha or Bear see the storm stirring inside her: *Lord, take away this spirit of fear. Let me see your divine providence.*

A few minutes later, Aisha reappears looking calm. She shrugs lightly, voice casual but edged with something shrewd. "You've been holding out on me."

From the bed, Bear's voice erupts, rough with urgency. "Come here, Aisha!" It's the moment he has been waiting for.

He sprawls on the bed, legs apart, skin still marked with the damp memory of Grace's touch.

Aisha's gaze slides to Grace, and in that silent glance pulses a truth deeper than speech: survival demands sacrifice, and Grace has already given enough for one night. With a faint nod toward the kitchen, Aisha makes her intent clear.

Grace offers no words. She pulls a t-shirt over her trembling arms and slips away, leaving silence and heat behind her.

"Aren't you the lucky one," Aisha murmurs to Bear, her voice light and practiced. She has perfected the art of compartmentalizing herself, slipping into whatever role the moment demands. To her, this is just another room, another body, another transaction.

She straddles his lap, fingers tracing slow, deliberate spirals across his shoulders. Bear leans back, grinning, trying to close the space between them. But Aisha stays composed, each movement a calculated step in the dance of control.

"Not so fast, Oso," Aisha murmurs.

Her fingers float across his skin, light and purposeful, never lingering longer than necessary. Her gaze holds steady in Bear's eyes, lips parting just enough to tease, but not to invite. A soft breath escapes her, barely more than a whisper, unreadable.

Bear tilts his head, eager to claim her, but she remains just out of reach, lingering on the edge of surrender.

Then she leans closer, her lips brushing his ear, voice slicing through the silence like steel drawn from its sheath.

"You stink, you motherfucker."

Bear freezes, confusion widening his eyes into something almost boyish.

A sharp laugh breaks from Aisha, quick and bright. She slides off his lap before he can react, her movements sinuous, her eyes gleaming with the thrill of the game.

Aisha catches his wrist with a swift motion, tugging him upright.

"Come on," she says, her voice smoothing back into velvet. "You want to enjoy this, don't you? I'm going to clean every inch of you."

Bear blinks, his pride wounded, but hunger still drives him forward.

"You have a shower or bath here?" Aisha asks, her tone brisk, businesslike.

"Yeah. Do I smell?" Bear's voice holds an edge of resignation, his earlier bravado slipping.

Aisha gives a tight nod.

She grips his arm. "Show me."

For a heartbeat, Bear simply stares at her. Then she pulls him toward the bathroom, hips swaying in a rhythm all her own.

In the kitchen, Grace hears the echoes of their movement, the slap of feet against concrete, the hiss of water striking tile. Aisha's cries follow soon after, high and piercing, braided with practiced pleasure. Each sound cuts through Grace's concentration, yet she keeps her hands busy, stirring, counting seconds like beads on a prayer rope.

Time unwinds its silent spool. Eventually, the rhythm behind the bathroom wall transforms, a thunder of flesh on flesh, vibrations humming through concrete and steel. Groans rise and fall, a harsh music driven as much by desperation as desire.

When Grace finishes her work, she edges back toward the shower. Passing the bedroom, she sees crimson marks on a pillow, spilled items covering the floor, and an overturned lamp. The air hangs heavy, woven of sweat, human scent, and a faint, metallic bitterness, evidence of moments both surrendered and seized.

The sheets remain twisted and damp, silent witnesses to Grace's earlier offering.

In the bathroom's haze, Aisha straddles Bear's face, eyes squeezed shut as waves of pleasure ripple through her frame. This time, her cries are not entirely feigned. Bear's hands grasp her with a hunger stripped of tenderness, seeking only the raw edge of sensation. And even in this fierce collision of bodies, there is a fragile mercy: for a few breaths, neither is captive to anything but the bright heat of flesh.

Survival demands masks and performances. But in stolen moments, Aisha chooses to let her body taste genuine desire. Beyond these walls, no one will ever know if her trembling was real or simply another expertly played role.

Past the steam and shadows, the world waits, impassive. And eyes unseen continue to watch, chronicling every tremor of flesh and every silent pulse of spirit, seeking meaning in the fragile space where body and soul entwine.

Confession

The new cell is a deception, though as Ikart likes to say, it's "about as comforting as a jaguar in a party hat offering hugs."

It has beds. Real beds. Thin, gray sheets tucked with false neatness. A kitchenette. A private bath. A small window where sunlight struggles through iron bars, slicing the floor into uneven shadows. For a moment, it almost feels like hope.

But prisons grant no true reprieves.

Hassan hesitates in the doorway, his fists clenching at his sides. Aisha moves with careful, measured steps, her shoulders rigid, braced for the walls to close in. Across the room, Grace stands by the bed, her gaze shifting between them before locking onto Aisha.

Then laughter.

Not joy. Not relief. Something brittle, edged with disbelief. Aisha and Grace collapse onto the mattress, clutching each other, laughter shaking their bodies, raw and uneven, caught between sobs and breathless release.

Hassan looks away, his gaze drawn to the window, though he sees nothing beyond it.

David steps beside him, staring past the iron bars at the motionless yard. The sky hangs too blue, too bright, its vastness pressing down with quiet indifference.

Life still moves here, a quiet defiance that even prisons cannot entirely silence.

At the far end, a cluster of chickens scratch at the dirt, heedless of the prisoners who watch them, unseen, uncounted. Even small creatures live by instinct, carrying on as if suffering were only for other beings to endure.

Hassan and David remain standing in silence for two hours. Neither speaks. Just watching.

Behind them, Ahmad drops onto a bunk and succumbs to sleep instantly, his exhaustion outweighing even vigilance. But Harjit doesn't sleep. He lies rigid, eyes fixed on the ceiling, his anger no longer a fire but something colder, tempered, hardened. Unbreakable.

Three hours later, silence claims them all.

Morning comes too soon, a mercy for some, a sentence for others.

Pale light filters through the barred window and lies across the floor, moving forward with or without mortal consent.

Hassan hasn't slept. Only Ahmad has; exhaustion won what fear could not. The rest lay all night with their eyes open.

When the warden's voice echoes down the corridor, calling his name, Hassan knows.

He knows before he stands. Before Ahmad's sharp glance flicks toward him. Before Aisha sits up, her fingers tightening in the thin gray sheets.

Before Grace invokes God's hand upon their lives. A verse stirs in Grace's spirit, and she speaks it aloud in a voice low yet clear:

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

The guards appear at the door. No words, only expectation, the weight of power carried in silence.

Hassan forces his muscles to obey, rising slowly. Aisha starts to move, but he shakes his head, just barely.

"Stay."

She says nothing, but her eyes sear into him as the guards pull him from the cell, the heavy door groaning shut behind him.

The room is a box, windowless, inescapable.

The sharp bite of disinfectant clings to the air, but it fails to mask what lies beneath: the scent of blood, sweat, and fear.

Hassan's boots scrape against the concrete as he's led inside. He controls his breathing, steadying himself against the inevitable.

The walls close in. The dim light flickers. Silence looms.

Then, he sees them.

The instruments.

Laid out with surgical precision, too neat, too careful. Their metallic gleam almost taunting under the fluorescents.

Pliers. Scalpels. Screwdrivers. Drills.

Not tools.

Weapons.

Memories flicker through Hassan's mind: his father's screams, the glint of steel, the smell of blood. He braces himself for what feels inevitable.

A shadow stirs. The warden steps forward, his presence creeping into the room, heavy and deliberate.

"Sit."

A command, not a request, spoken as if obedience were a foregone conclusion.

Hassan hesitates, only for a second. Then, the chair's metal legs shriek as he sinks into it.

The warden approaches unhurried, the way a man approaches a meal he has already paid for. A short, stocky guard steps in, face blank, and tightens the restraints around Hassan's wrists and ankles without once meeting his eyes.

"I see how you look at her," he murmurs.

Hassan stiffens.

"How she looks at you."

The warden crouches to Hassan's eye level, the way a man crouches to speak to a child he's about to disappoint.

Hassan doesn't answer. Doesn't move.

His throat works once, dry, before he can stop it.

What is he talking about?

The warden waits. He has the patience of a man who has never once been refused.

He leans in, voice dropping to something almost confiding. "Confess. Or everyone pays."

Hassan says nothing. The dry click in his throat answers for him.

The warden studies him the way he might study a ledger that doesn't balance. "What is she to you?"

Hassan's jaw tightens. "A prisoner."

"Don't lie." The warden's mouth curls. "I know what you want."

Hassan doesn't answer. He breathes the way he was taught to breathe before a blow lands.

The warden's smile widens by degrees. "Does your father know you've fucked that girl?"

Abruptly, the warden's eyes flick to a spot where Lakita hovers. It's not sight, exactly, more a prickle of some half-forgotten instinct, the faint awareness humans sometimes feel when watched by things they cannot see.

I tilt my head in silent warning. Lakita returns a single, curt nod and dissolves deeper into the folds of invisibility, leaving behind not even the faintest ripple. The warden blinks, dismissing the flicker of unease, and turns back to Hassan.

Hassan remains silent.

Without warning, the warden spins and strikes him with a savage side-fist. The blow lands hard against Hassan's jaw. His head jerks sideways, a sharp crack echoing off the walls. Blood blooms across his teeth, bright and vivid.

Hassan's grip tightens on the chair, his gaze fierce. "I haven't touched her."

The warden's smile widens. "We both know what you want."

"I like her, yes, but nothing's happened."

"You keep saying that." The warden slides a photograph across the table. "Pictures don't lie."

Hassan barely glances at it. "She was cold. We shared a blanket."

"I could ask little missy." The warden exhales sharply, feigning weary exasperation. His fingers drift over a drill on the tray, its low whirl sawing into the silence. "Maybe this will jog her memory."

Hassan tenses. "Please, don't."

"Confess, and maybe I'll just punish you."

Hassan's breath quickens, ragged. "Just me?"

The warden's smile is slow, predatory, a wolf circling its prey.

Hassan's heart slams in his chest, a frantic rhythm, every muscle in his body screaming to fight back, but the weight of the warden's words presses down like stone.

His breath quickens. His eyes dart to the floor, thoughts swirling, Aisha, his father. What can he sacrifice? What truth can he afford to lose?

"Just me?"

The warden's grin widens, cruel and knowing. "Confess, or it's your father and Aisha. I have a witness."

Hassan's body trembles, rage, helpless and useless in the face of this. He swallows hard.

"No. They're lying. And I don't care if you have a video, nothing happened between us."

"One of the guards heard you."

"He's lying. Nothing happened."

The warden's eyes gleam, savoring the silence between Hassan's words, reading him like an open book.

"Fine. Bear, bring them in."

A cold knot of fear tightens in Hassan's chest. "Who are you bringing in?"

"Papa first. It'd be a pity to see your girlfriend's blood spill before we've even started our discussion."

Panic churns in Hassan's gut. The warden doesn't bluff.

"Stop!"

The warden and Bear freeze.

Hassan's breath quickens. "I'll tell you what you want to hear. Just don't bring them in here."

The warden's smile tightens. "Very good."

Hassan exhales shakily, a thin veil of relief skimming the surface of his fear, though he knows better than to trust any reprieve offered here.

"I've seen how you look at her," the warden murmurs. "You think you're protecting her, but you're only making things worse. Tell me the truth now, and maybe, just maybe, I'll make this easier for you."

"Leave them out of this," Hassan gasps, desperation raw in his voice. "We just... stayed close. For warmth."

The warden leans in, his breath cold. "Did you fuck her?"

"No." The word is a strained gasp.

"I will torture her if you don't confess. Did you..."

"Yes," Hassan chokes out at last, sacrificing his own truth in a final attempt to shield the two lives more precious to him than his own.

The warden's lips curl into a slow, venomous smile.

"No. Yes. You'll say anything. Did you think you could play me for a fool?"

The smirk vanishes like a blade snapping shut.

"Go get them, and we'll move your worthless ass out of here!"

He slams his palm against the tray of scalpels, sending metal instruments skittering across the floor in a shrill, clattering cascade. Straightening, he looms closer, breath rank with bitter coffee and the quiet arrogance of a man convinced he commands the fate of every soul in the room.

"She's mine now."

Hassan's stomach clenches as if a fist has already landed there. But the real pain follows.

Two guards seize Hassan before he can react, their grips like iron as they zip-tie and gag him. One drags him down the corridor, the other delivering fast, hard punches and kicks that crack with sickening force, each aimed at maximum pain. Finally, Hassan's thrown into another empty cell, terror hammering in his chest, a rhythm of helpless rage. The final blow lands, his head slams against the cold concrete floor. Blood pools in his mouth, metallic and sharp. One guard spits on the floor beside him. "We'll be back."

Dread seeps into the space left behind, thick and smothering. His body throbs. His thoughts swim, scattered and flickering like candle flames in a wind.

And then,

The sound of the door creaks open again.

Hassan's vision blurs, not just from the pain, but from the weight of guilt. Aisha's face pales as she steps forward, her eyes wide with shock. The horror on her face feels like a blade, sharper than the guards' blows.

"Hassan..." Her voice cracks, barely more than a whisper.

He tries to speak, but his throat tightens, choking on words that won't come.

Guilt floods him, thick and suffocating, the weight of his confession heavier than any of the physical blows.

As his vision fades, darkness overtakes him.

That night, Hassan is summoned again.

Not for questions. Not for threats.

For judgment, human judgment.

The warden's voice slithers through the corridor like oil poured over stone.

"You lost," he hisses.

Hassan stares into empty air, as though searching for a crack in fate itself, and mutters, "This isn't a game."

"Take him to the yard."

The prisoners are led to the observation window, forced to look out into the courtyard beneath cold starlight. Gravel crunches under boots. Metal doors slam open and shut. The wind carries dust and half-formed prayers whispered by trembling lips. Dim lights cast the dirt yard into long, shifting shadows.

The warden stands before them, smiling, a smile carved from cruelty and certainty. Fox hovers nearby, rifle in hand, eyes flat and watchful.

"Hassan."

Aisha screams, her face pressed against the glass, leaving streaks of fog and tears.

The warden raises the gun.

Aisha's breath seizes in her chest. Her fingers press flat against the glass, the cold of it spreading up through her wrists.

Then the shot fractures the night.

The sound ricochets off concrete walls, sharp as shattering glass.

Hassan crumples, his body folding inward as if trying to hold the life spilling out of him.

Aisha's scream tears through the silence, raw and piercing, a sound at once human and holy in its naked agony.

The warden exhales slowly, savoring the dominion he believes is his. His voice is smooth, measured with the cadence of a man who has taught himself to call cruelty righteous. Hassan's head rests in a widening pool of blood. Yet the most shocking thing, if

there is anything left that can shock an angel, comes in a fraction of a moment: Aisha's spirit rises from her body, writhing, its colors shifting again and again before it slips back into her flesh.

"Defiance has a price."

His gaze settles on Aisha, cold and possessive. Then he glances at Hassan's lifeless form.

"She's mine now. She'll learn."

When the prisoners are herded back into their old cell, the space feels cavernous. Hassan's absence drapes over the room like a funeral shroud.

Aisha cannot be comforted. Her grief coils around her spirit, tight as wire. She seems hollowed out, each breath a silent battle.

The others move softly, as if afraid even their footsteps might disturb the raw wound of her sorrow.

Later, she did not know how much later, Aisha reached for the notebook. The others were asleep, or pretending to be. She opened to a fresh page and sat for a long time without writing.

Then:

His name was Hassan. He stepped in front of a bullet for a woman he did not know. I was there. I will not forget it. I do not yet know what I am going to do with that, but I know I will not waste it.

She closed the notebook. She had not written her daughter's name. She did not need to. Her daughter was in every word.

I have stood in the aftermath of many deaths. I have watched the living absorb the weight of the gone and redistribute it, into anger, into silence, into the particular hollowness that follows the loss of someone the world needed and did not keep. I have watched this one hundred and sixty times, across as many worlds. The others I know only as record. And still it does not become ordinary.

You should know what it cost to arrive at this moment. Not just this night, or this prison, or this particular configuration of cruelty and bad fortune. What it cost across the full length of everything.

In the beginning, the second beginning, after everything had been destroyed and remade, there was only the Void again. Black, cold, nothing. From within it came Essence, neither substance nor absence, but the force from which all things draw breath, including the gods.

For ages beyond counting, the darkness stirred. Pride and arrogance fed upon themselves until everything curdled. Ragnarok came. Gods and giants fell alike. All went dark.

Then, from the Void, out of Essence itself, two gods rose: Jehovah and Brahma. Within them both was a hollow place seeking form. An ache that longed to be filled.

Together, they turned toward creation.

But Jehovah could not sustain what he made. Every beauty he shaped, he destroyed, not from rage, but from ache. He built worlds of stunning intricacy, then unmade them when they failed to satisfy the hollow in his chest. He named this urge love. Destruction became a language of care.

Brahma watched. Finally, he spoke: "We embrace desire by building, yet when the work is complete, there is nothing left to cherish. We seek only perfection, but perfection leaves nothing to love. How can one cherish without first accepting the flaws of our design?"

Jehovah believed that Brahma, and no other god, could understand his thoughts. So he agreed. Yes. No more destruction.

In secret, however, he fashioned something new.

He shaped Love itself into his own image and set it loose upon creation. He called himself Father and required obedience to provide

acceptance. Love became conditional. A gift dependent upon submission. To love was to submit. To submit was to live.

Fearing the ruin of all creation, Brahma turned to Essence for balance. From that appeal arose the Council of Ancients, Watchers who would guard what the gods had made.

I am one of those who watch the Watchers. Essence chose me, and I have served since the Council's founding.

I was there.

The cave existed before stone learned to be stone, a wound in the fabric of reality itself, not carved but necessary. The River of Life pooled at its entrance, and beside it grew the Tree of Knowledge, its roots drinking from waters that remembered the first moment anything ever thirsted.

We descended in silence. Brahma first, then the assembled gods, their light dimming as we moved deeper. I followed, wings folded tight, my presence barely disturbing the air. Even gods lowered their voices in the presence of the Oracle, the ultimate truth.

The Oracle of Essence sat chained to a stone column in the cave's heart, beside a pool so still it might have been black glass. I noted the optics. Essence could have presented herself as anything one could imagine, the King of Kings, a pillar of fire, a voice without form. Instead, she chose to be a frail young woman chained in submission in front of a council of paternal gods. She maintained the form of a girl: knees drawn to her chest, bare feet tucked beneath a simple robe that seemed woven from spider silk and moonlight. Above her right shoulder, a brass key hung suspended in the air, rotating slowly as if caught in an imperceptible current. Always within reach. Never touched.

The chain at her ankle was long, perhaps twenty paces, with links that chimed softly when she moved, like distant bells. The metal was something older than iron. Something that existed before iron knew its name.

The Oracle had been weeping. Her face was streaked with tears that caught the faint phosphorescence of the pool, and her eyes, when she lifted them to regard us, held the weight of every truth simultaneously known. The Tree of Knowledge grew from a fissure in the stone behind her, its branches heavy with fruit that gleamed like garnets in the dim light.

"Spirit of Essence," Brahma said, his voice reverent. "We seek counsel."

The Oracle stood. The chain sang its small song.

She walked to the Tree without speaking and plucked a single fruit. Three bites. No more. She chewed slowly, deliberately, and I watched her expression shift, first wonder, then comprehension, then a grief so vast it seemed to age her a thousand years in the space between heartbeats.

Then she began to cry.

Not the quiet tears that had marked her face when we entered. These were sobs that shook her entire frame, raw, inconsolable sounds that echoed against stone and water until the cave itself seemed to weep. She moved from the Tree to the pool's edge, then to another stone, then to the column where her chain was anchored, as if trying to outpace what she now knew.

She could not.

"One hundred and sixty-eight," she whispered.

The number fell like a stone into still water.

Brahma stepped forward. "What does this mean?"

The Oracle's eyes blazed, not with tears now, but with something that made even gods take a step back. A bolt of light shot from her finger, arrowing through the assembled deities to stop directly in front of a sprite perched in the shadows, a Controller observer, so insignificant that I had barely registered its presence.

"Tell them," the Oracle commanded.

The sprite's voice was quiet, matter-of-fact. "One hundred and sixty-eight is the number of destruction cycles fated to consume Jehovah's universes."

Silence.

The Oracle nodded slowly, and the gesture carried the weight of Essence itself, not loud, but absolute. She turned back to the gods, her expression holding something close to contempt.

"One hundred and sixty-eight worlds built with care and wonder. One hundred and sixty-eight worlds unmade when that care curdles into hunger." She paced the length of her chain, each step punctuated by delicate chiming. "Floods. Famine. Fire raining from skies that fracture like broken glass. Oceans rising to swallow mountains. Children drowning in their mothers' arms while the earth splits beneath them. Plagues that turn flesh to ash. Darkness that devours light. Silence where cities stood."

**I felt the words settle into my bones. I had suspected. I had feared. But hearing it spoken, **

"Why?" Brahma's voice was barely audible.

The Oracle looked at him with pity. "Because he cannot fill what is hollow within him. Because he has named his hunger love, and love demands perfection, and nothing made can ever be perfect enough. Because, "

The cave went silent.

Not the silence of absence, but of presence, a sudden, total cessation as if sound itself had been erased from existence. The Oracle's mouth continued to move, but no words emerged. Her eyes widened. She took a step back, then another, until the chain pulled taut.

I turned.

Jehovah stood at the cave's entrance, light radiating from him in waves that made the shadows flee. He descended slowly, each footfall deliberate, and as he moved the Oracle retreated as far as her chain would allow, pressing herself against the far wall.

Her weeping had stopped. Her mouth was closed. But her eyes screamed everything her voice could not.

"Brother," Jehovah said to Brahma, warmth in his tone. "I came as soon as I heard you had sought the Oracle. Surely any wisdom given should be shared between us?"

The Oracle shook her head, small, frantic movements. Her hands grasped at her throat as if she could force the words free, but nothing came.

Brahma's expression was carefully neutral. "The Oracle was explaining the cycles of creation. How what is built must sometimes be unmade to make room for what comes next."

"Ah." Jehovah smiled. "The eternal return. I understand this truth well."

He moved to the Tree of Knowledge and plucked a fruit, examining it in the light radiating from his palm. "May I?"

The Oracle could only stare.

He ate. One bite, then another. His smile never wavered. "Bitter," he said. "But enlightening."

He turned to the Oracle directly. "You serve Essence well, child. Your wisdom is a gift to all creation."

She flinched as if struck.

When Jehovah finally left, ascending back toward the surface with that same measured grace, sound returned to the cave like a gasp of air after drowning. The Oracle collapsed to her knees, hands braced against stone, her whole body shaking.

"He doesn't know," I said quietly.

"He cannot know." The Oracle's voice was raw, scraped hollow. "Truth cannot reach the one who has made himself its opposite. His nature prevents even Essence from speaking directly to him. He hears only what confirms what he already believes."

Brahma knelt before her. "Then how do we stop this? How do we break the cycle?"

The Oracle looked up, tears still streaming. She reached toward the hovering key, her fingers stopping just short, then let her hand fall.

"There is a material," she said. "Forged from opposing principles, order and chaos bound together, neither consuming the other. Chauvin material. It can quiet his nature. Contain what cannot be contained."

"How is it made?"

"By two who stand in opposition yet share a single purpose." Her voice steadied. "Sodo, Jehovah's Watcher Angel and keeper of law. And Lucifer, his perfect creation, wrought with wisdom and beauty beyond measure. Light and shadow. Obedience and rebellion. Only they can forge what is needed."

She paused. A strange expression crossed her face, not quite a smile, but close.

"You think you know how that story ends," she said. "You don't."

I have witnessed every cycle that included the Celestials. One hundred and sixty times I have stood guard as worlds were born and

flourished and fell. One hundred and sixty times I have watched the pattern repeat.

The Chauvin material was forged to protect the creations. The Council was formed. The watching began.

*But that story is not the one I need to tell you today. Today I need to tell you about a door creaking open in the dark. *

Diaspora

Later that evening, gunfire erupts outside their cell. Explosions pound the earth, shaking dust from the ceiling and sending vibrations through the floor like ripples over dark water.

The door creaks open. Fox slips into the corridor, careful not to be seen from the chaos beyond. His voice is low, urgent.

“Time to go. Leave everything. The Novyy Kazaks are here.”

Fox had made his calculation weeks before the raid and it was, by any measure, an elegant one. He knew where the prison was. The Novyy Kazaks wanted to know where the prison was. The transaction was straightforward. He collected Alexei's gold for services rendered and the Kazaks' reward for services rendered in the opposite direction, walked out of Rosocova with both, and was celebrated by everyone who survived. I have watched men do terrible things for money and call it necessity. I have watched men do necessary things for money and call it heroism. Fox did not call it anything. He simply closed the deal.

Elsewhere, the warden is absent from the compound. He lounges with Anechka and Bohdan in the private room above the tavern, a young girl arranged for them, fourteen, perhaps fifteen.

They are hiding. The girl was one of the children displaced by the week's violence, her family gone. She was in need of a home and she received one; she now serves a different kind of need in the way that the powerless always serve the powerful when no one is watching. The fire is low. The liquor is good. Outside, the day is ending in the particular way it always ends in Rosocova, with gunfire and screaming and the smell of things burning that should not burn.

Alexei swirls his glass. His phone rings, unanswered.

For the briefest instant, something flickers across his expression, a subtle shift, like a man who feels a sudden chill.

Anechka refills her own glass without waiting to be offered. She has never waited to be offered. She watches the phone until it stops ringing and says nothing.

Bohdan smiles at nothing in particular. He has always been good at that.

Just a draft, he tells himself.

He raises his glass. "Where were we, ladies?" Then, without hesitation, he toasts the air. "To a beautiful future."

At that same moment, back within the compound, the world explodes.

Shouts. The crack of gunfire.

Flashes of muzzle fire slice through drifting smoke. Bodies surge and scatter in the dark.

Fox is already in motion, leading prisoners as planned. Bear and Wolf remain trapped deeper inside, pinned under relentless fire. The air vibrates with the scent of gunpowder and sweat.

Lakita watches from the shadows, eyes tracking Aisha's every move. But in the swirl of violence, something else arrests her attention:

Grace.

She isn't merely surviving. She's moving with purpose.

Lakita's eyes narrow. There's no hesitation in Grace's steps, no wasted movement. She guides others through the turmoil like someone who knows precisely what must be done.

This is new.

Telel has observed how Lakita watched Grace in the past, the way Grace steadied herself in faith, clinging to prayer, sustaining herself with endurance.

But this? This is not endurance.

This is Grace in command. A leader.

Even Lakita recognizes something familiar in her.

My hands have never guided her, Lakita thinks, but she has learned all the same. Essence did not choose her, or did it?

Perhaps Grace has absorbed more than words. Perhaps Essence had known Grace was meant to be here all along.

(It surprises Lakita. And that surprise ripples up to me as well.)

Telel senses the spirits stirring, not speaking in words, but in vibrations more ancient than language.

The fight surges on. The Novyy Kazaks push forward, bullets punching through concrete while prisoners dive for cover.

Grace doesn't think. She acts.

She seizes David's arm, pulling him upright before hesitation roots him in place. "We don't hesitate," she breathes, scanning for threats.

David exhales sharply but nods. He trusts her.

Ahmad hauls Aisha to her feet. She's dead weight at first, grief anchoring her where she stands. But something inside her stiffens.

Hassan would not have hesitated.

Neither will she.

"Move quickly," Ahmad urges, his voice sharp with fear. "This may be our only chance."

Behind Fox came another, Viper, broader, quieter, the kind of man whose stillness you only noticed once the shooting started.

The group surges forward. Fox and Viper carve a ruthless path through the compound.

David and Grace scoop up weapons dropped by fallen guards.

Grace doesn't hesitate.

David holds his rifle with the steadiness of a man trained in the IDF. But Grace moves differently. She's not just following. She's leading.

From the shadows, Lakita watches, intrigued.

They press on, swift but cautious, the battlefield alive with smoke and screaming steel. Joaquin "Kuya" Bayani, the quiet Filipino commando, advances ahead: methodical, efficient, lethal.

"Weapons here!" Viper tosses a rifle to David. He fumbles it at first, then grips it tight, breathless.

Grace bends and retrieves a sidearm from a fallen guard, all smooth economy of motion.

David stares at her, brow furrowed. "You know how to use that?"

Grace doesn't answer.

She simply racks the slide with practiced ease. Her hands are steady. Her eyes don't waver.

David lets out a breath.

Lakita, hidden beyond flickering emergency lights, sees it now:
Grace does not hesitate.

She does not flinch.

Her faith is not weakness.

It is certainty.

"Move!" Joaquin barks.

The group rushes forward, ducking low as bullets chew through concrete walls.

Gunfire erupts in sharp, relentless bursts.

Fox and Viper carve through their enemies with lethal precision, leaving no time for counterattack.

Harjit dissolves into the shadows. He doesn't fire a gun. He doesn't need to. He is a blade, a ghost. A whisper of motion. Steel catching the dim light.

A muffled gasp.

A body collapses.

He's gone again.

David glimpses a flicker of motion from the corner of his eye.
"Did you see that?" he murmurs to Grace.

Grace doesn't answer. She's already moving, firing short, efficient bursts, covering their flank.

Ahead, another guard rounds a corner, rifle raised.

He never gets the chance.

Harjit descends on him in a heartbeat, a swift, precise slash to the throat. The guard stiffens, then folds to the floor. Harjit lowers the body in silence, almost gentle in the gesture.

Lakita continues to observe. She notes the discipline, the deadly calm. But there's something else in Harjit's movements, an undertow of purpose, a quiet fury that bleeds into every strike.

She knows why. He is driven by revenge.

David and Grace fall into step, moving as though they've trained together for years.

He sweeps the left. She guards their rear.

A guard emerges, rifle leveled.

Grace fires first.

Two shots. Clean. No wasted motion.

David exhales, half admiration, half disbelief. "Damn."

Years in the IDF taught him to recognize skill. But the way Grace moves is different. Not merely confident. Not merely trained.

Fearless.

Efficient.

Grace barely spares him a glance. "Stay focused."

David nods, adjusting his grip on the rifle. They advance like seasoned partners.

But they're not.

Somewhere between the smoke and screams, David realizes the truth:

He trusts her.

Not just with a weapon.

With his life.

Grace meets his eyes for a fraction of a second. Something flickers there, understanding, shared resolve. Perhaps more.

But there's no time for more. Not now.

"On me," Grace orders, taking point.

David follows.

The battle isn't over.

Not yet.

The world roars around them: gunfire, shouted commands, the splatter of bullets against stone.

Joaquin grabs Aisha's arm, yanking her upright. His grip is firm but not unkind. She stumbles, crushed under exhaustion, grief, and fear.

"Move!" Joaquin snaps.

For a second, she doesn't.

Her body is lead. Her mind remains trapped in memories of Hassan's laughter, his voice, his presence beside her.

Gone.

But then chaos snaps her back.

Fox and Viper press ahead, slashing through the remaining guards. Harjit becomes a silent phantom. Grace and David cover the rear, fluid and precise.

They are moving. Surviving.

Hassan would not have hesitated.

Neither will she.

Aisha clenches her jaw and forces her body to obey.

Each step drags. Grief claws at her muscles. Too slow. Too weak. Not enough.

A bullet smacks into the wall near her head, spraying dust. She flinches.

Joaquin grips her arm tighter, anchoring her.

"Aisha. Breathe." His voice is calm, unwavering. "We need to move."

She barely hears him.

Her breath comes ragged, shallow.

Joaquin doesn't let go. "I won't let anything happen to you."

The words cut through her fog.

She recoils at the promise. He cannot make that promise.

It's exactly what Hassan would have said.

But Hassan is gone.

"I can't." The words fracture as they leave her lips. Her voice is raw. "Hassan's gone, and I—"

Joaquin tightens his grip, steady as stone. "I don't know your friend. But I understand your loss. Now is not the time to fall apart. Now is the time to move."

Aisha shakes her head, trying to pull away. Joaquin doesn't release her.

Joaquin's jaw shifts once, the way a man's does when he has said a thing so many times it has worn smooth and still costs him.

"I walked away alone. I know what you're carrying."

His words strike her chest like a hammer blow.

Something inside Aisha splinters, but not into pieces. Instead, it forces her lungs to fill, her pulse to settle.

She looks up at Joaquin. He doesn't blink. Doesn't waver.

"You honor them by surviving," he says. "Now let's go."

Aisha swallows, hard. She doesn't wipe away her tears. Doesn't pretend they aren't there.

But she straightens.

Nods.

"I'm with you."

She moves now, not just because she has to, but because she chooses to.

The grief remains. It will always remain. But it no longer owns her.

Hassan would not have hesitated.

Neither will she.



They reach a courtyard, where guards and rebels clash in a violent firefight. Bullets chew through crates, ricochet off concrete walls. The guards, armored and better armed, push forward.

"Frag!" Fox hurls a grenade. It explodes, sending smoke and shrapnel through the air.

"Frag!" Viper tosses another, an improvised explosive that detonates with brutal force, sending bodies sprawling.

Up above, guards rain bullets from a second-floor balcony, trying to pin them down.

Viper swings his machine gun upward and unleashes hell.

"Fox, take that balcony!"

Fox moves with lethal precision, lobbing a grenade into the nest of shooters. The explosion knocks them off their feet. The gunfire from above goes silent.

But the fight isn't over.

A hail of bullets cuts across the open ground. David, Ahmad, and Grace make a run for cover but suddenly, David stumbles.

A sniper. Positioned high on a catwalk.

David throws himself behind a crate as bullets whiz past his head. Ahmad is caught in the open, pinned down, unable to move.

David lifts his rifle, trying to find the sniper who has exposed his position by firing. He cleverly bugged out, and he's on the move to another position.

Then, a single gunshot cuts through the chaos.

The sniper drops, his rifle clattering to the ground.

Grace lowers her pistol, her breathing ragged, her arms steady. David blinks. He looks from the sniper's corpse to Grace.

She gives him a small, cocky smile. "God provides."

"And evidently protects also." David shakes his head. "I owe you."

Grace grins. "Yeah, you do."

She grabs his hand, yanking him up. They sprint toward the exit, Ahmad close behind.

Joaquin spots a narrow alley behind a stack of crates. It's their best chance to escape but it's a gamble.

"I'll clear the way," Joaquin says. "Stay close. Don't stop for anything."

Aisha nods, though her body trembles with exhaustion.

Joaquin moves like a ghost, advancing in quick, controlled bursts. He spots a guard on the balcony above. Lifts his rifle. Fires.

The guard crumples before he can react.

They push forward, driven by desperation. The air reeks of blood, burned metal, and fear.

Aisha stumbles again, her body barely holding together.

Joaquin catches her before she collapses.

His grip is solid, certain. He does not waver.

"We're almost there," he murmurs, pulling her back to her feet. "You've got this."

Aisha exhales, unsteady but determined.

Through the chaos, they reach the alley where Viper and the others wait.

Ahmad takes Aisha's arm, urging her forward. But she glances back at Joaquin, her breath ragged, grief pressing down on her but somehow lighter.

"You were right, Kuya," she whispers. "I won't give up."

Just beyond Joaquin's shoulder, Lakita watches, arms crossed, a smirk tugging at her lips. Her dark eyes glint, not with amusement, but with something closer to approval.

Telel notes how Lakita remains silent. She speaks no praise aloud. She doesn't need to.

Aisha presses forward.

Joaquin nods, satisfied, then pivots back to Viper, ready for the next push.

The night air is thick with smoke and the acrid sting of gunpowder. Explosions rumble in the distance, shaking the ground beneath their feet.

Fox moves fast, keeping low, eyes constantly scanning. Viper is just ahead, alert for threats. The prisoners stumble onward, dazed yet determined.

Lakita drifts along the shadows, eyes locked on Aisha. Telel observes the truth: Aisha is moving, but she's fragile, held together by sheer force of will.

Then there's Grace. Steady. Focused. She's not merely moving; she's directing. Urging prisoners forward, catching stragglers when they falter. She doesn't bark orders. She simply leads.

Telel sees how Lakita wasn't expecting this.

Up ahead, Fox suddenly throws up a fist. Instantly, everyone drops low.

Gunfire pops through the air like snapping cords. Shouts. A flash of movement near the gates.

Viper curses under his breath. "Blockade."

Fox's jaw tightens. "We're cutting through."

He turns, scanning the group, voice clipped and urgent. "We need people who can fight."

David grips his weapon tighter. "I can."

Grace doesn't hesitate. "Me too."

Ahmad swallows, looking toward Aisha, then squares his shoulders. "I'm in."

Lakita watches, and Telel senses her pulse quicken.

This is it. The moment that decides who will make it out.

And who will not.



The battle is over.

The night air hangs heavy with smoke and exhaustion. The prisoners, now survivors, gather in the shadows of their first fragile taste of freedom.

Ahmad exhales, hands braced on his knees, steadying himself. His eyes drift to Aisha, who stands a few steps away, arms crossed, her face a mask without expression.

He straightens and takes a step toward her. "Come with me."

Aisha blinks, caught off guard. "Where?"

"Punjab." Ahmad wipes sweat from his brow. "I'm going back home. I've had enough of this war. I want to rebuild. Start over." He hesitates. "You could start over, too."

Aisha's gaze slides past him, searching the darkness as though seeking a world beyond all this blood and smoke. "Start over?" Her voice is quiet, with a brittle edge. "Like none of this happened?"

Ahmad shakes his head. "No. But you don't have to keep fighting."

A slow breath leaves her chest, weighted with things unsaid. She doesn't answer immediately.

Some wounds teach survival too well. Long after they close, peace can feel more dangerous than war.

"Thank you," she says at last. "But I can't."

Ahmad studies her, then nods. He had expected this answer, though he'd allowed himself to hope for another. "Then I hope you find what you're looking for."

Aisha nods once. "You too."

He lingers for another heartbeat, then steps back. Silence settles between them.

He turns away, his path chosen. Aisha watches him go, then searches the survivors for someone else.

She finds Joaquin "Kuya" Bayani among the gathered survivors. The quiet Filipino commando checks his gear, each movement precise and ritualistic.

Aisha crosses to him and stops within arm's reach. Without looking up from the strap he is tightening, Joaquin says, "You should be resting."

"I don't want to rest." Her voice is firm. "I want to learn."

Joaquin pauses and looks up at her. "Learn what?"

Aisha's fingers flex at her sides. "How to fight. How to survive. Not just react or endure." She swallows. "I want to be ready next time."

Joaquin studies her face, looking beyond the grief and exhaustion. What he finds is resolve. He shakes his head. "Once you step into this life, you don't simply step out again."

Aisha holds his gaze. "I wasn't planning to."

Silence holds between them.

At last, Joaquin gives a small, resigned nod.

"All right," he says. "We start tomorrow."

Aisha releases an unsteady breath. The tension in her shoulders eases by a fraction. This is not closure or peace. But it is something.

For tonight, it is enough.

Nearby, Harjit stands alone, arms folded, staring into the dark. The battle has ended, but his has not.

The warden is still out there. Breathing. Free. The knowledge burns inside Harjit.

By every mortal logic, Harjit should be hunting him. Stalking him. Driving a blade into his throat. It would be easy. Harjit has done far worse to men who deserved far less.

Then Ahmad's voice carries across the courtyard:

"I'm going back to Punjab," Ahmad says. "To rebuild."

Harjit's jaw tightens. He says nothing. Vengeance keeps its own rhythm inside him.

Yet when he looks at Ahmad, he sees another possibility: a man choosing to build rather than destroy.

"Punjab," Harjit repeats. The name carries the weight of home; from a Bajwa, it carries twice as much. "My mother's people were Bajwas. Other side of the line."

Ahmad nods. "Punjab could use someone like you."

Harjit exhales slowly. Killing the warden would bring satisfaction, perhaps even a moment's peace. But it would not restore his hair, his honor, or his people.

It would not undo what was done.

His fingers close around the knife at his hip. For the first time, the blade feels lighter.

At last, he meets Ahmad's eyes. "Fine." His voice is quiet but steady. "I'll go with you."

Ahmad clasps Harjit's shoulder. Nothing more needs to be said.

Harjit may never believe the violence is truly behind him. Vengeance will continue to call from the dark.

But for now, he turns away from blood.

For the moment, that is enough.

I have watched many things in the years between that courtyard and this hotel. I have watched Ahmad plant mint in Punjab and teach his neighbor's son how to slice fruit without waste. I have watched Harjit carry his grief into useful work, though the grief has never left. I have watched Grace and David build a life on a sunlit beach in the Philippines, their son between them, his hands wrapped around a toy boat.

And I have watched Aisha.

Not every day. She did not need watching every day. What she needed was space, and she took it, systematically, methodically, with the precision of someone who has learned that the distance between a locked door and an open one is mostly a matter of knowing where to press.

She called herself The Cartographer. The name was earned. One hundred and fifty black-site camps. Mapped, infiltrated, dismantled, ahead of schedule, according to Joaquin, who was first to say it and last to stop being surprised by it. She was first in and last out. Always.

In a safe house somewhere (I will not say where) she sits at a table at three in the morning. A map. A decision that will cost someone something.

I will tell you what the decision was. Not because it was the largest she ever made (it was not) but because it was the one that showed me who she had become.

There was a man. A source. He had given her the location of a camp, one of the smaller ones, forty-three prisoners, a guard rotation she could work with. The information was good. She had checked it three ways. It was good.

But he had also given the same information to someone else. Someone who would sell it rather than use it. Someone whose interest in the camp's prisoners ended at the price they might fetch elsewhere.

Aisha had two choices. Move on the camp immediately, before the other buyer could act and get the forty-three out. Or spend the next seventy-two hours finding the buyer, neutralizing the transaction, and then move on the camp.

The first choice saved forty-three people with certainty.

The second choice might save forty-three people and prevent the same source from burning three more camps down the line.

She sat with it for eleven minutes. I counted. Then she put her finger on the map: not on the camp, but on a name two cities over and said, without looking up:

"Get me Joaquin."

Seventy-two hours later, all forty-three were out. The buyer was not a problem anymore. The source gave her two more camps before the year was done.

She was right. She was almost always right.

What I noted, what I filed, under the heading I reserve for things that do not fit my existing categories. That was not the decision. It was the eleven minutes. The sitting with it. The willingness to let forty-three

people remain in danger for seventy-two hours because she could see further down the road than the immediate rescue.

Hassan would not have waited eleven minutes.

Aisha knew that. I could see her knowing it. And she waited anyway.

That is not coldness. I have seen coldness. This was something else: the discipline of someone who has learned that love, deployed without strategy, saves fewer people than love deployed with it.

She learned that in a prison cell. From a bowl of soup.

By this point she had filled eleven notebooks. She kept them in a waterproof case that traveled with her everywhere, into camps, across borders, through checkpoints where everything else was searched and sometimes taken. The notebooks were never taken. I do not know if that was luck or something else. I have stopped trying to determine the difference. Even in Jehovah's economy, a few things occur by chance.

The eleventh notebook was not full yet. She wrote in it less frequently than she once had, not because she had less to say, but because she had learned to say it differently.

There was also a letter. One page, handwritten, copied out in her own hand each time she gave one away. She had written perhaps two hundred copies over the years, distributed to people who moved through the world in ways she could not: aid workers, resettlement coordinators, teachers in schools that served children who had been displaced or adopted or simply lost from the records that should have held them. The letter did not ask for anything. It said only: if you encounter a young woman of approximately this age, from approximately this background, who may have questions about where she came from, give her this. And it contained a way to reach Aisha. Nothing more.

She had received three responses over the years. None of them were her daughter.

She had sent the letter out again after each one.

I asked her once, not aloud, but in the way Watchers sometimes ask, pressing a thought gently against the edge of someone's awareness, whether she was afraid her daughter would not want to be found.

She did not answer immediately. She was refolding a map.

Then: "It doesn't matter what she wants to do with it. It matters that she has the choice."

That was the whole of her theology. Twenty years, two hundred letters, eleven notebooks. Not a demand. Not even a hope, exactly. A door, held open. The rest belonged to her daughter.

She still writes in the notebook. Not every day. But often enough.

The last entry I read over her shoulder: I am not supposed to do this, but I am old and my vices are few. It began like this:

You are twenty years old now, or close to it. I do not know your birthday. I do not know your name. I know only that you exist, and that knowing has been enough to keep me moving through every door I could find. I have not found the right one yet. But I am still looking. I will not stop.

She closed the notebook. She did not look up. She already knew I was there.

She said nothing. Neither did I.

That is often enough.

Bright Lights

Two decades after Rosocova Prison closed, a banner flutters outside the opulent Polievkova Hotel, which in another age was the Rosocova Inn & Café:

The First Gathering of Strangers.

A title dripping with irony. For no one here is truly a stranger to blood.

Down the main road, the golden dome of Saint Nicholas shines in the distance. The church had been completely rebuilt after the prison below was demolished and filled in.

Humans call this progress. I call it a thin coat of paint over rust.

The new government of Mondansk calls tonight amnesty. The decree was simple: stand before witnesses, confess what you did in the dark years, and walk out clean. Reconciliation, they named it. National unification. I watched the drafters argue past midnight over every clause, and I can attest that they believed in it. Sincerity is rarer than humans suppose. I do not report it lightly.

But a decree is only as faithful as the hands that carry it. Somewhere between the signing and this ballroom, other hands took

hold of the night. The invitations went out under the government's seal. The guest list did not.

The world now urges unity, even for those who once wielded power in the dark. I have watched many such gestures across centuries: sometimes sincere, sometimes mere theater. Tonight will prove to be both, which is the most dangerous kind.

In pursuit of that lofty goal, wardens, government officials, guards, and prisoners have gathered to confront the past and, perhaps, to make amends. Some came to forgive. Some came because forgiveness was promised. A promise of forgiveness is the surest bait for men who cannot forgive themselves.

At a modest café table sits an older gentleman in a custom-made ivory mohair suit and a pearl-gray Borsalino fedora. His legs are crossed, one polished shoe keeping rhythm with the conversation across from him. The gentleman is Ahmad Bajwa. For a year, he chased whispers, false names, and buried records. Then the new government, eager to heal a divided nation, offered amnesty and delivered what violence never had: a man's location and a sanctioned audience, embossed in official print. Tonight, Ahmad is not a detective. Not a bounty hunter. Just a man in a fine suit, waiting for a man in a borrowed one.

Time has stripped them both of what they were. Time does that. Even to angels.

The woman beside him is Aisha, now a fearless advocate for the imprisoned. Beside her sits Joaquin, her comrade, friend, lover, and steadfast ally. They talk the way people talk when they have bled together: easily, and about everything except the blood.

Beneath polite words, grief simmers, especially for Ahmad, whose son's name sits unspoken between every breath.

I feel the weight of that name upon them, hanging like a silent prayer.

Ahmad's gaze lifts to the doorway. He raises his glass of sparkling sarsaparilla. A quiet toast. A signal. A reckoning yet to come.

When Medved arrives late, threading between tables with the caution of a man who distrusts the furniture, their shared history arrives with him, pressing against the fragile peace of the moment like a blade sheathed but not forgotten. He has come for the amnesty. He has come to confess and be washed clean, because the seal on his invitation was real and the promise underneath it was not.

He does not know the ledger has changed hands.

"Ahmad? Aisha?"

"Good to see you, Medved," Ahmad says, voice warm but measured.

The man exhales sharply. "Call me Mikhail now." His gaze flickers between familiar faces, recognition swimming alongside discomfort, and something darker I cannot quite name.

"Hello, Medved. I'm just leaving." Aisha stands, pressing a kiss to Ahmad's cheek: light, deliberate. A gesture that speaks volumes. Humans can say much without words.

The man beside Aisha straightens, extending his hand to Ahmad.

Ahmad clasps it firmly, his other hand pressing down, anchored on Joaquin's shoulder. "Thank you, Joaquin, for all that you've done."

Joaquin dips his head in quiet acknowledgment. "Truthfully, it was Aisha. She didn't just help free people: she planned it. The

Black Brigade had us losing ground, and she changed the game. We called her The Cartographer, because she mapped every weakness in the system and then walked us through the gaps."

He glances at her, and his voice drops below admiration, into something closer to awe. "First one in. Last one out."

Around the table, an older man Aisha never freed lowers his eyes when her name is spoken. He does not need telling who she is. None of them do.

"She has gifts," Joaquin says.

"Yes," Ahmad agrees. "She does. What are you two doing now, since the war efforts are being handled by the President's new Green Brigade?"

Aisha wipes a tear from her eye. "We want to raise a family. There are so many children without a home or anyone to care for them."

Joaquin nods, his hand resting lightly on the small of Aisha's back, a silent confirmation of shared purpose.

Then, the moment tightens. Aisha exhales, her focus sharpening like a blade. "We need to go. There are circles that still need weapons and help getting organized."

Aisha and Joaquin exchange a look, then melt into the crowd. They do not leave the hotel. They only leave Ahmad's table. Their presence lingers, like the last note of a hymn fading into silence.

Ahmad gestures for Mikhail to sit, then signals a nearby waitress.

Alice moves silently among tables, her red name tag glinting under soft light. She is a minor note in the music of the room, but sometimes even small notes carry the melody. I make a mental

note to watch her closer. Humans like her often become fulcrums of fate.

Because beneath the surface, something else simmers.

This is no mere reunion.

Ahmad nods, setting his cup down slowly, folding his hands in his lap.

"A last drink before we go."

Mikhail arches an eyebrow. "You? Drinking?" A smirk tugs at his lips, amused by the thought of this man of faith raising a glass.

Humans often expect faith to erase all human habits. They forget even the faithful thirst.

"Sparkling sarsaparilla," Ahmad replies. "It is not alcohol, so it is not haram. And that's what I like." He lets the silence stretch just long enough before adding, "And you? Kvas?"

"I'll have vodka," Mikhail says. "With whatever zakuski they have. Pickles, maybe."

"Excellent." Ahmad nods toward the waitress and raises a hand as a cough rattles his chest: dry, persistent, the kind a man learns to hide when he has decided it is nobody else's business.

"How's life been since the release?"

"I've managed," Mikhail says. "The Novyy Kazaks took nearly everything, but they overlooked my flower shop back in Russia."

A flower shop. The symmetry is almost beautiful. A man who once oversaw darkness, now tending petals.

"I lost my son," Ahmad replies, matter-of-fact. The two men sit in silence as Ahmad takes a measured sip of the remnants of his tea.

In that pause, I feel the absence in Ahmad like a hollow ringing through glass.

"You were hard to find." Ahmad swirls his drink, watching Mikhail over the rim. "Alexei said you'd come back."

Mikhail's brow furrows. "I haven't spoken to Alexei in years." His voice falters. The name stirs something buried, an old darkness shifting under newer scars. His fingers graze the rim of his glass, a gesture almost invisible, but to me, it speaks volumes of fear.

The air thickens, though no wind moves. Candlelight flickers across their table, casting shifting pools of gold and shadow. I sense the pull of something invisible gathering between them, like a bowstring drawn tight.

"Ahmad," Mikhail says, forcing a chuckle that dies on his lips. "When you say 'last drink,' it sounds final. You're not sick, are you?"

Ahmad doesn't answer immediately. Instead, he reaches into his pocket, withdrawing a small cloth.

He takes his time, methodically wiping his glasses, smoothing away a spot that might not even exist. Each quiet movement stretches the silence a little further.

Then a faint smile ghosts across his lips, a smile humans might mistake for kindness. But I know how angels smile when weighing souls.

"I appreciate your concern," Ahmad says at last, sliding his glasses back into place. His eyes, cool and clear behind the thin lenses, hold Mikhail as firmly as manacles.

Mikhail shifts in his chair, too quickly. The seat that moments ago seemed soft and worn now feels like a narrow cage pressing into his ribs. The walls have not moved. But to him, the entire room has shrunk.

Humans measure time in minutes. I measure it in the space between breaths like these.

The conversation unfolds in layers, each word placed with precision, each pause a hammer striking the anvil of memory. Titles have vanished. Ranks have dissolved. But memory remains. Memory decides who holds keys, and who remains locked behind them.

Around them, the gathering hums: a gentle murmur of porcelain and glass, silverware clinking, low conversations. But under it all runs another current, darker and patient. A waiting.

Mikhail straightens, fighting to slow his breath. He tells himself this is only dinner. A harmless meeting. But the truth clings to his skin like sweat. His knuckles blanch around the glass.

Around them, people pass: former prisoners, former guards, those who wore power like a uniform and those who wore its bruises. Each carries a private storm behind polite faces. Mikhail feels the subtle gravity pulling at the room, a tide impossible to resist.

He tells himself the past can be left behind. That words can smooth the jagged stones of history.

It's a lie humans often tell themselves. It rarely works.

Ahmad leans forward, voice soft as a blade sliding from its sheath. This is the real purpose of their reunion: a reckoning twenty years in the making.

The waitress approaches. Alice. Her red name tag catches the candlelight, a sudden flicker of crimson. Two gold stars gleam on her collar. Her presence seems small, harmless, but even the smallest pawns can tilt the board.

"They're waiting for you," she says.

Ahmad gives a single, deliberate nod. "The room?"

Alice returns it, just as measured.

"Good. Let's take our drinks." Ahmad exhales, voice dropping lower. "The soup is ready."

"Where are we going?" There's no suspicion in Mikhail's voice. Only the hope of an ordinary answer.

"Downstairs," Ahmad says. "You know it. A few floors below where you and Alexei used to meet."

The way he says it halts Mikhail mid-breath.

A momentary delay, like a man reaching for a door handle only to discover it's been locked from the inside.

"The Inn and Café are remodeled now. It's a ballroom," Ahmad continues, his tone almost casual. "Tonight, there's food. Drinks. Entertainment."

He pauses, just long enough for the silence to seep in.

"The children are in another room. Sweets. A clown to keep them busy."

Mikhail doesn't ask what the children need distracting from.

They descend a stairwell heavy with velvet drapery and echoes of laughter that never quite reaches the bottom.

When they emerge into the ballroom, candlelight flickers over polished silver. At the long dining table, name cards gleam like

fate already written. It's all been arranged, down to the last breath.

Ahmad sips his drink, eyes watchful. "You mentioned a family. Do you have children?"

Before Mikhail can answer, two towering men in red turbans step into place behind his chair, silent as shadows carved from stone.

Mikhail tenses. "Who are they? Why are they here?"

Ahmad swirls his drink, slow and precise. "Relax," he murmurs. "All in time."

Humans misunderstand such gestures. They think swirling a glass is only for taste. They forget how power lives in the space between words.

Ahmad watches Mikhail across the rim of his glass, not merely looking at him, but measuring him, as one might weigh a soul on unseen scales.

"You wonder why we're truly here tonight?" Ahmad's voice stays soft, yet it claims the space around them. "Why this gathering after all these years?"

He sets his glass down soundlessly. The candlelight fractures in the polished table, scattering a thousand tiny reflections like stars.

"Essence remembers," Ahmad continues. "It seeks balance, filling voids left by injustice and cruelty, even the ones we pretend we've forgotten."

A pause. Not long, but enough for the words to settle into Mikhail's chest like stone.

"Tonight, Essence's will is clear."

Ahmad leans closer, each word delivered with a care that carries its own threat.

"It demands a reckoning."

He turns to the Sikh soldiers, who wait with stillness deeper than silence. When Ahmad speaks in low, fluid Urdu, the syllables ripple outward, layering the air with meaning beyond language. The soldiers remain unmoving, yet their presence thickens until it seems even the shadows press inward.

Ahmad's gaze flicks back to Mikhail, eyes utterly without warmth.

"Let's just say," Ahmad says, voice dropping to a near-whisper. "You might need them tonight."

Mikhail scans the ballroom. He sees now that every table mirrors the same tableau: men flanked by silent watchers. No weapons visible. And yet the air vibrates with something wound tight and waiting, a thread pulled taut long before tonight.

He shifts in his chair, trying to escape the tightening snare. A server approaches quietly, setting down hot tea and a bottle of Nemiroff. Though the room is still, the tea ripples in its cup, as if some invisible tremor runs through the floor.

A bead of sweat traces down Mikhail's temple. He doesn't raise his hand to wipe it away.

Mikhail's voice emerges in a whisper. "What's going on here?"

Ahmad smiles, not cruel, not kind. Merely inevitable. He exhales, his words unhurried.

"We wait."

A breath. A glint of candlelight on steel cutlery.

"We talk."

Stillness gathers in the spaces between heartbeats.

Ahmad lifts his glass, slowly, deliberately.

"Soon," he murmurs, almost as an afterthought. "We'll toast to Mondansk Soup."

Before Mikhail can speak, Ahmad raises his hand. A crisp snap echoes, and a spotlight bursts into brilliance over Mikhail. A second later, lights blossom around the room in perfect circles, revealing faces once hidden in gloom.

Mikhail flinches, shielding his eyes from the glare.

Ahmad's voice slices through the hush with polite finality. "Excuse me," he says, his gaze locked and steady. "Our guests have arrived."

"Who? Who? Who's here?" Mikhail stammers, twisting in his chair.

Two men step forward, moving through the parted crowd to join the table. I recognized the first one immediately, the measured stride, the economy of movement, the particular calm of a man who had once led six prisoners through a burning compound and chosen to get them out. Fox. Lisitsyn, in the life before that.

"Lisitsyn, good to see you," Mikhail says, relief breaking across his face. A brief embrace. "I haven't seen you since they released us. Who's your friend?"

"You don't remember him?" Ahmad's voice remains soft, but his eyes glint like glass catching firelight.

Mikhail hesitates. "No, should I?"

"You might not, but you should," Ahmad says. "This is Harjit. He was one of the captives."

Mikhail tries for a smile, but his discomfort bleeds through. "Harjit? No, I don't remember."

The waitress fills Harjit's glass with vodka. Her motions are calm, efficient, as though none of this were happening.

Harjit leans forward, his broad shoulders bending the light around him. His fingers drum the glass's rim, a rhythm meant to calm fury, but it fails.

"I know what you did."

Mikhail stiffens. "What are you talking about?"

Harjit's fingers tighten until his knuckles stand out pale. His voice remains even. "I will tell everyone. I've already told the warden."

Mikhail's breath hitches. "This guy's delusional. I don't have a clue what he's talking about."

Ahmad raises one hand. Instantly, Harjit stills.

"Patience, Harjit," Ahmad murmurs. "All in good time."

Mikhail swallows, his throat bobbing visibly. A sheen of sweat glistens at his hairline. "That was years ago!" His voice breaks on the last word.

Then, an interruption.

A woman strides in, her dragon-scale boots striking the floor in sharp, deliberate cadence. Conversation dies in her wake. Movement slows, as if even time itself hesitates to let her pass.

She weaves among the guests, pausing to murmur brief words that freeze men mid-step, mid-breath. When she reaches Ahmad, he remains utterly still, his thoughts hidden behind the faintest narrowing of his eyes.

She lifts a hand over Mikhail's head. Her voice is ice and iron.

"Reveal yourself. Remember."

Without breaking eye contact, she presses a slim card into Harjit's palm. "Tell Aisha to meet me at the bar."

Then she turns away, her steps crisp, and the room breathes again. Conversations resume. Glasses clink. But the air is heavier, as though the gravity of the world has subtly shifted.

Ahmad shakes his head, his voice low but certain. "Bear, do you remember?"

Mikhail, Bear, shrugs, though unease crawls across his face. "Really? What exactly did you hear?"

"I heard you talk about Hassan's execution," Harjit says.

Bear fidgets, his voice trembling. "Yes, it was tragic. And now the Novyy Kazaks shut the prison down."

The hush that follows is sharp and absolute.

A wheelchair rolls forward from the shadows, pushed by unseen hands. The hush deepens as soft wheels glide over polished marble, a sound gentle as silk, carrying the weight of a verdict already rendered.

Alexei emerges, slumped in the seat, his once-imposing frame now diminished, hollowed by time. His eyes, milky and sightless, search the space as if memory alone might guide him.

Mikhail's breath catches. "Warden?" His voice is thinner than he intends. "Is that you?"

Alexei tilts his head toward the voice, his lips curling into something between a sneer and a fading echo of command.

"Soup didn't save Hassan," he murmurs.

A pause follows: a single breath, stretched thin as a blade.

"And it won't save you either."

I noted it. He was not wrong, and he knew it. That was the worst of it: a blind old man in a wheelchair, and still the most precise person in the room.

Mikhail shakes his head, voice cracking. "Alexei, I did nothing to you. We were friends."

Alexei's frown deepens, the lines around his mouth carving deeper. His voice turns brittle. "We are not friends. You defiled her. And the others."

Bear, Mikhail, stammers, desperation clawing at his words. "Alexei, you said to execute them all. I, I wanted some fun."

Alexei's face tightens, grief and fury fighting for dominance. His frail hand rises, a trembling gun clutched in skeletal fingers, yet the barrel stays steady as an iron law.

"I killed the wrong man," Alexei whispers. "I must make it right."

Somewhere unseen, a song stirs: a Russian folk tune soft and mournful, drifting like smoke through the cavernous ballroom.

"Oy, Moroz, Moroz,"

Oh, frost, don't freeze me or my horse.

I have a wife; she is very jealous.

She waits for me at home.

She is grieving for me.

I am coming to her.

Harjit moves without hesitation, a silent decision executed in an instant. His hands slide plastic over Mikhail's head. The rustle of polyethylene sounds impossibly loud in the silence that swallows the room.

Mikhail jerks, his hands clawing at the slick surface, eyes bulging, mouth opening in a scream that never forms. Around him, watchers remain still, each circle of tables caught in its own hush of anticipation or horror.

All across the ballroom, other small circles echo this ritual, each fate arriving on its own dark schedule.

Mikhail's breath rattles against the plastic. His face flushes, then darkens. His body bucks once, twice, then sags, the fight going out of him. But the rattle does not stop. It thins, wet and shallow, clinging to him. He is not dead. He has only been carried to the lip of it and held there.

Something else was present in the room.

I registered it the way I register things without immediate category: at the periphery of attention, feeding before I had fully located it, gone almost before I could fix it in place. It held no form I could read. It cast no signature matching anything in the record I carry across one hundred and sixty-eight worlds. It was not a spirit of the place, not a darkness drawn by the violence concentrated in this room, not anything belonging to the ordinary taxonomy of what gathers where cruelty and grief and long-deferred justice meet in the same hour. Something else entirely. Something that had arrived with a specificity of purpose that distinguished it immediately from the ambient darkness this building had spent decades learning to host.

It was feeding.

Not on the death. Not on the violence of the plastic or the gun or the kirpan's clean arc. On something underneath all of those things: the raw concentrated charge of three hundred people carrying twenty years of hatred and fear and grief into a single room and releasing it simultaneously, the specific electricity of a reckoning long prepared arriving at last, the enormous human weight of it reaching its peak as the plastic stole the breath from him and the whole room leaned, as one body, toward the thing it had gathered to witness.

That charge, in a room like this, at a moment like this, is not a small thing. I have measured it across centuries and I know its dimensions. Whatever this presence was, it knew them too. It moved through the room's energy with the focused precision of something experienced, not consuming, not disrupting, simply drawing, the way a root draws water: quietly, completely, without disturbing the surface above it.

I attended to it for the length of three heartbeats.

Then it was gone, withdrawing with the same absence of announcement with which it had arrived, leaving the room exactly as it had been except for a quality I could not fully articulate: a faint and precise diminishment, as though the charge had been reduced by exactly the amount something had needed and not one degree more. Surgical. Practiced. The work of something that had done this before, in other rooms, at other peaks, and knew to the last measure how much it required.

I filed it the way I file the unnameable. Carefully. Without forcing an interpretation. With the specific certainty, unaccountable but reliable, that I would know it again when I encountered it elsewhere.

The song plays on, sweet and sorrowful.

Harjit peels the plastic from Mikhail's head. Breath rushes back in a ragged whoop. His chest heaves. His eyes stream. Alive. Harjit wanted him alive.

Alexei's voice rasps from the wheelchair, soft but lethal. "Aisha is mine. No one else has the right."

He reaches out, palm flattening against Mikhail's wet face, fingers walking downward, reading him the way the blind read everything. He finds heat and damp at the jaw, the throat, and

takes it for the chest. He does not know they are tears. He does not know he is the reason they fall.

He sets the barrel where his hand has told him the heart must be. A single shot cracks through the silence, sharp as splitting ice. But the hand lied. The bullet punches low, into Mikhail's abdomen.

He gasps, clutching his stomach, blood already staining his shirt.

A second shot follows. Then a third. The ballroom erupts: a chaos of startled gasps, chairs scraping marble, shattering glass.

But not everyone moves.

Harjit steps forward, calm as ever. From his waistband he draws a revolver, though he tucks it back before using it. Instead, the kirpan gleams silver in his grip.

A swift, practiced arc of steel slices across Mikhail's throat.

Blood spills in a crimson wash, drenching marble tiles. Mikhail collapses. His final breath leaves him soundlessly.

The old man believed it was his bullet that did the work. I did not correct him. He has spent a long life in misdeeds, and I confess I do not understand why he was permitted to keep drawing breath this long, while better men were carried out of this place in bags. But I am not given the ledger. I only read what is set before me. And what is set before me now is this: his own reckoning waits nearer than he knows. Sooner than the soup. Sooner than he could fear, but he doesn't. He should.

In the hush that follows, Harjit gently guides Alexei's wheelchair toward Anechka's table. A few scattered sobs rise from the room, mingled with whispers of approval. But mostly there is silence, a hush deep enough to feel sacred.

Alexei reaches for his lover's hand: the hand of an old man now, shriveled at the knuckles, coarse veins raised beneath skin mottled with the particular markings of a life lived without apology. He reaches without looking. He does not need to look. She is always there.

Anechka takes it.

Not from habit. Not from duty. From the particular knowledge of someone who has shared enough of a life with another person that their silences have become a language more precise than words. She feels the tremor in his grip: not weakness, but release. Something long compressed, finally exhaled. The hatred he has carried for twenty years has found its object and spent itself. What remains is older and quieter than hatred.

She does not look at his face either. She looks at their hands, his ancient and marked, hers no longer young, and allows herself, for just this moment, to acknowledge what they have been to each other. Not lovers only. Not partners in the clinical sense. Something harder to name and therefore more real. Two people who chose each other across decades of choices that cost everything else.

The loss of Aisha still lives in him. She can feel it in the way he holds on: too tightly, the way he always has when something has already slipped away. That pain will not discharge tonight. It never will.

But something else has.

No explanation passes between them. None is needed. None would help.

Nearby, on a table speckled with shattered glass and cooling candle wax, a single photograph leans against a crystal salt shaker.

An old camera shot: David, Grace, and their son, caught mid-laughter on a sunlit beach in the Philippines. Palm trees sway in the golden haze behind them. The boy sits between his parents, tiny hands wrapped around a toy boat.

The photo stands untouched amid blood and bullet casings. And somehow, in that small rectangle of color, it speaks louder than any chaos around it.

Aisha tenses before she even sees Harjit approach.

The energy in the room has shifted: an unspoken ripple moving through the crowd, as if space itself is bending around something unseen.

Harjit steps beside her, steady as ever, but there's something different this time: an invisible weight riding just behind his voice.

Without a word, he slides a plain white business card into her palm.

Embossed letters press into her fingertips:

Lakita: Master Controller.

Aisha's breath stills.

Not fear. Not recognition.

Something between them: a beginning she nearly missed.

Harjit leans in, voice low. "She's at the bar."

"With Grace."

Aisha turns her head.

Lakita stands at the edge, unnoticed by most, unmistakable to her.

She isn't watching Aisha.

She's waiting.

Aisha doesn't move right away.

The card in her hand feels heavier than paper.

Like a key.

Or a mirror.

She inhales, then steps forward.

The crowd shifts unconsciously, parting.

Each footstep is a release.

Each breath, a quiet reckoning.

Grace stands beside Lakita, her expression still, luminous.

Barefoot. Grounded and unbound.

Aisha slows only once. Looks between them.

Then she steps into the space between.

She reaches for Grace's hand, gripping it, solid and real.

Lakita wraps her arms around them both.

And that's when Aisha exhales.

Not in surrender.

In acceptance.

Not as victim.

Not as soldier.

As part of the order.

Something shifted at the edge of the room: not loud, not announced, the way Victoria never announced herself. Aisha felt it before she saw it. A presence that did not press or demand but

simply was, the way certain things are simply true. She had felt presences before: Lakita's green shimmer, Tel-el's ancient chill. But this was different. Warmer. Patient in a way that had nothing to do with waiting.

She turned her head slightly. Then she knew.

She stepped back from the embrace. One hand went to the bag at her side: the same bag she had carried out of Rosocova, out of the prison, through twenty years of safe houses and supply routes and dismantled camps. She reached in and took out the notebook.

It was not much to look at. The cover was worn soft at the corners. The pages had swelled slightly with age and handling.

She held it for a moment. Then she turned to Victoria.

"I need you to find someone," she said. Her voice was steady. "She is approximately twenty years old. I do not know her name. I do not know where she is. I know only that she exists."

She held out the notebook.

"When you find her, give her this. Don't read it. It isn't for you."

Truth be told, we all knew what it said. We are Controllers after all.

A pause. Almost a smile.

"It isn't for me either, anymore."

Victoria took it. She did not open it. She simply held it with the care of someone who understood exactly what she was holding without needing to be told.

The dog sat.

Aisha exhaled, fully, finally, and turned back to the room.

Far in the back, trying not to be seen, sits my lead investigator. Still in the Ducky T-shirt. Bright red swim shorts. Snorkel gear, too. Why? No one ever really knows.

He's eating soup. Slowly. Happily.

He looks ridiculous. Out of place.

And yet, somehow, perfectly placed.

I think I got celestial goosebumps when it hit me. That stupid thing he used to say. The one I laughed off back then: Misplaced things have a way of turning into something else.

"It's about time!"

The voice is not Lakita's. Another figure shimmers into view: ethereal, draped in emerald green. She glows, soft and vibrant, a gentle radiance lighting the air around her.

Beside her, a dog stands: calm, alert, faithful.

A few voices call out with sudden warmth and delight:

"Victoria!"

Aisha inhales deeply. The scent of lilies lingers: soft, unshaken. It stirs something unexpected.

Not relief. Not victory.

Joy.

Around the room, glasses rise. The silence is reverent. The moment, thick with the unspoken.

Harjit lifts his glass, his voice light. Almost amused. Almost.

"To soup."

Indiscreet Threats

Camille,

This message is classified—its contents are to be conveyed solely to Brahma, Chair of the Committee on Special Affairs.

Start of Message

Your Excellency,

I write to notify you of an impending investigation into the disappearance of a celestial operative. Preliminary indicators suggest a breach within the ranks of Jehovah's Celestial Forces.

Until this investigation is made public, I urge you to conduct a discreet inquiry of your own. Any findings should be passed directly to Victoria, Supreme Commander of the Master Controller Armed Forces.

The pattern observed in Mondansk: operatives disappeared, celestials exposed, mortals weaponized against the unseen. This threat has been documented before. It has never previously been coordinated.

End of Message